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THE RAIDERS HAD HIM AT LAST IN THEIR POWER, BUT LITTLE OLD JIM GARED FOR THAT.

OR,
THE RAIDERS OF THE RANGE.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS,
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BARNACLE," "WARBLING WILLIAM,"
"BILLY, THE GYPSY SPY," THE
"TEXAS TOM CAT" NOVELS,
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
CROSSED PISTOLS.

THE cowboys of the Double-Bar Ranch were returning from their unsuccessful chase, very jaded and dejected and somewhat crestfallen. They had been completely outwitted. They might not have felt so cut-up if it had been the first time this thing had occurred; but it was not the first time, nor the second. A round half-dozen would come nearer the true figure.

Encouraged by these repeated failures the Raiders of the Range were becoming over-bold; and their last descent had been the most daring of all. In the open light of day they had swooped down from their fastness in the hills and driven off a big bunch of cattle and a number of ponies. A pursuit had been organized, but now the pursuers were returning, humbled and chagrined, and fuming at their lack of success.

There were more than a dozen of these cowboys—all stalwart, manly fellows, many of them young, though here and there the grizzled beard of a veteran might be observed.

Their leader and foreman was a handsome young athlete, known as Luke Stevens. He was in advance, and there was a peculiar, nervous look on his rather dark face, as he rode silently along, giving a cut at one of his big boots every now and then, with his quirt. What he was thinking of would not have been easy to guess, for he was given to taciturnity.

Yet Luke Stevens held the respect of his followers, for he was courageous and capable, and knew the ins and outs of the cattle business as well as the oldest head there. He was trusted, too, by his employer, and it was even hinted that he stood high in the estimation of his employer's daughter, charming and petite Kitty Marshall.

Suddenly they drew rein and huddled together in surprise. They had rounded a rocky spur of the hills, and before them they saw a shabbily-dressed man, mounted on a mangy, characterless beast, that seemed more forlorn even than its rider.

As they closed up in a compact body, giving them a belligerent appearance, the unknown horseman slipped from the saddle to the ground, and using his animal as a shield, quickly drew and cocked two big revolvers. These he leveled over the saddle, with his hands crossed in a way never before seen.

The cowboys noted this singular attitude, and, though threatened by the revolvers as they were, could not restrain their smiles. That the unknown individual could do effective shooting seemed, at first glance, absurd. But when they looked closer, they observed that one of the big revolvers bore directly on the foreman, and that the other threatened a cowboy who had dropped his hands to his holsters.

"I do b'lieve it's one of the Raiders!" whispered the cowboy nearest the foreman. "He's been a-layin' by because his boss is played."

The suspicion thus expressed was communicated to the others with electrical quickness. It was a plausible surmise. This was near the route the Raiders had taken, and there appeared no good reason why any one else, save the cowboys, should be in that region.

In spite of the menacing revolvers, Luke Stevens gave his broncho a dig with the spur, and urged him forward. His followers imitated his example, and crowded close at his heels.

At this movement the stranger squinted along the tubes of his weapons, and called out:

"Don't crowd the cattle, pardners! For the love o' livin', don't! It might be onhealthier than an attack o' cholery."

They were near enough now to get a good view of the man's face. It was homely and freckled; but the mouth, which was wide, wrinkled good-humoredly at its corners. In addition, he was cross-eyed; so sadly cross-eyed, that, as one of cowboys afterward remarked, "if he should weep, the tears would run down the back of his neck."

Did this account for the peculiar position in which he held his pistols? was a question the cowboys asked themselves, as they stared at the queer figure, and drank in the warning words. It did indeed seem that his eyes were so crossed that if he sighted two revolvers at the same time, he must necessarily cross his hands to enable him to do it.

"I'm gentle as a sucking-dove, if you don't push me, but if you push me, I git r'iled like any rattler!"

Courageous as Luke Stevens was, he did not care to crowd too closely on a man who thus stood at bay. For a moment he hesitated, his eyes scanning the dilapidated beast and its dilapidated owner, while he endeavored to make up his mind what to do.

The stranger's horse took no apparent interest in anything, but stood with drooping head, and legs spread widely apart, as if too tired or too lazy to look about him.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" Stevens called out.

"Slash your questions up, pardner, and they'll be easier to answer, and go furder."

"We think we know who you are, but we want to hear your side of the story. What's your name?"

"Thank 'ee! That's better! My name's Jim. The handle's double-j'nted and reversible. Kansas Jim, er Jim Kennedy. Take yer pick an' ch'ice. It don't make a bit o' diff'rence to me."

"And now, what are you doing here?"

The words were sharp and filled with suspicion.

"Got tangled up, somehow, in my reckonin'!" a merry smile curling the lips. "Been huntin' fer a ranch hereaways, called the Double-Bar. I guess it's lost, strayed or stolen. Must be, fer I never got lost in my life!"

"I suppose you never heard anything of Big Head Mike's Raiders?" shooting at him the same suspicious glance.

"Never heern o' the large-headed gen'leman, 'pon honor! Is he lost, too?"

Some of the cowboys laughed, but Stevens's frown was of the severest.

"It may not be so funny, after a little. Perhaps you don't know that the Raiders have been stealing cattle?"

"Don't know anything, 'ceptin' that my arms is gittin' powerful tired holdin' up these hyer guns, an' a-lookin' two ways at onc't allus gives me a crick in the neck. If ye're goin' to charge on me why don't ye? Land o' goodness, yes!"

Again the cowboys laughed.

"Put down your cannon, then. We are not going to charge on you. But we're going to take you in and take you along with us, if you don't answer questions pretty straight. I think you know something about Big Head Mike, The Double-Bar Ranch doesn't lie out this way."

"No? Then if you'll p'int it out to me, pardner, I'll be everlastin' obligeed. I 'low I'm standin' perpendicular, but the sun's been a-shinin' in the north, all mornin', and if the north pole ain't swopped with the south pole I'm just away off. You bain't noticed anything queer that way, now?"

"I think you're a lying old sinner, and that you are not lost at all. From the way your horse is pointed, I'd judge you were pottering along toward the hills as fast as the old skeleton could carry you. And Big Head Mike and his men are somewhere in those hills. We belong to the Double-Bar, and if you really want to find that place you can go along with us."

The pistols had been lowered, and now the stranger swung heavily into the saddle.

"D'y'e hear that, Boomerang?" addressing the sorry beast. "These hyer kind gen'lemen is a-goin' to put their hands in ounr, an' lead us on our way. An' that means fodder at the eend o' the trail, an' mebbe a feed of shelled corn."

"I calls him Boomerang," lifting his cross-eyes smilingly to the cowboys, 'cause he allus comes back to me. I've abandoned that boss more'n a dozen times on these prairies an' trudged on alone, knowin' I could outwalk him, but ever blessed morain' when I waked up, I'd find he'd nosed out my camp an' foller'd me. An' so I tuck him to my bosom, as it were."

"Now, if you'll kindly p'int out the way, I'll go along of you!"

CHAPTER II.

AT THE DOUBLE-BAR.

PHILIP MARSHALL, the ranch owner, stood in the shade of the piazza which served to break the rays of the almost vertical sun, and looked out over the vast expanse of prairie toward the heaped-up foot-hills. He saw that his cowboys were returning, though they were yet so far away he could not determine whether this last chase had been successful or not.

He was troubled and ill-at-ease. If these raids continued, he was a ruined man. The Raiders were becoming bolder and bolder. Marshall was not a typical ranchman, and did not look the ranchman, as he stood there. His appearance betokened the city man, more used to the ways of business in the crowded marts of trade than to the life he was now living.

Such indeed was the case. Until two years before, his life had been principally passed in mercantile pursuits. He had failed, however, and gathering up the remnants of his shattered fortune had come west and embarked in cattle rearing.

Until recently he had been successful, in spite of his lack of experience. He had made but little money, as yet, but his herds were increasing, and a competence seemed to await him in the near future.

His anxiety was so great, that he called to his daughter who was in another room, requesting

her to bring the glass. She appeared, shortly, with the desired article.

As has been hinted, she was a handsome young woman, resembling her father in many respects, but with the indescribable charm and grace of youth.

He took the large binocular from her hands, placed it to his eyes, and closely scanned the approaching party.

"They have failed again," he said, lowering the glass with a sigh. "I felt in my heart they would. It is strange, strange, they cannot find where those outlaws hide themselves. I am told some of the cowboys are good trailers, and it seems to me they ought to be able to follow the footprints of so large a body of cattle."

"But the passes and defiles are rocky and almost numberless," the daughter interposed. "I feel sure they would follow those men, if they could."

Marshall did not reply, but lifted the glass again.

"They have some one with them!" he declared, somewhat excitedly. "Yes; they have made a capture! Perhaps we can bribe or force the scamp to reveal the whereabouts of his comrades."

The party under the command of Luke Stevens came on at a gait rather slower than usual, because of the poor pace of the stranger's horse; but they reached the ranch within an hour after they were sighted by Marshall.

"If you've got some shelled corn, give Boomerang jist a mouthful, an' he'll thank you till his dyin' day," Kansas Jim pleaded, as he saw his steed being led to one of the stables. "Shadders o' sorrier! What tribulations me an' that critter hev passed through! 'Twould actilly make the heavens weep if I should recount 'em!"

The cowboys had closed about him, and Philip Marshall and his daughter had come forward to hear what the stranger had to say.

"What's your business?" Marshall questioned, when he had listened to Stevens's account of how and where the man had been discovered.

"Present business, I s'pose?" glancing with his cross-eyes from father to daughter. "Tain't nothin' to speak on, though I hev hopes. I've lately been doin' the cowboy act, but durin' of my time, I've foller'd everything. Started out by follerin' a circus band into the cruel an' unknown worl', an' hev been follerin' this thing an' that thing—charmed by the glitter an' shine o' uncertainties—an' hyer I am on the aige of nowhere, an' huntin' fer a job. Kin you give it to me?"

"Do you know anything about cattle?"

"Cunnel, ask me what I don't know 'bout cattle! I used to ride the sacred ox down to water, every day, when I was with the circus. Then, there was a bull that allus chased me 'cross lots, in the days o' flowery youth; an' sence then, I've formed the acquaintance of cattle of every kind an' pedigree. Lately I hev been doin' the cowboy act."

He emphasized this assertion as if it were a clincher.

"I'll bet ye can't rope a post!" one of the cowboys sneeringly exclaimed.

"Jist gimme a lass', an' I'll show ye!"

A lasso was passed to him, and the cowboy pointed to a hitching-post that stood near.

Kansas Jim looked at it earnestly, with his twisted eyes.

"The sunbeams sometimes tie theirselves into knots an' spile my aim," apologetically, as he looped the rope for hurling.

Then it shot out with a swish, and to the astonishment and delight of all, save the victim, settled in a graceful fold about the neck of the cynical cowboy.

"Sho! The sun was right square in my eyes, that time! It do beat all! I'm allus a-lookin' two ways at onc't, an' the chances are about e'kal that I'll git mixed at what I'm aimin' at. Now, with one eye I seen you a-standin' there, an' with t'other eye I seen the post; an' jist as I throwd, the optikel nerves give a jump an' the blame rope went where I didn't intend it. I'm shore I beg your parding!"

"That's a lie!" cried the cowboy, angered and humiliated beyond endurance.

"Hev it your way, sonny! I never quarrels wi' the wisdom o' youth. Shade o' Solomon! No! 'Twouldn't be any use. I'll aim at you, this time, and then I'll be shore to ketch the post."

He was swinging the rope again, preparatory to hurling it, while the delighted cowboys were screaming with laughter.

The cowboy had dropped a hand to his revolver, but the roper paid no heed to this, as he hurled the rope with unerring aim at the post. Although not a difficult feat, it was neatly done,

and showed that whatever else Kansas Jim might not be able to do, he could certainly handle the lariat with grace and skill.

Throughout this by-play, the look of interest and wonder on Philip Marshall's face had increased; and now, to the surprise of all, he invited the stranger into the house, saying he wished a few words in private with him.

Kansas Jim obeyed, a tickled grin testifying his belief that the invitation had been extended because of the skill he had just displayed.

"So long, pardners!" his face wrinkling in laughter, as he looked over the group. "I'll be out in a minute, an' then if you want me to ketch a real live steer, jist p'int him out to me. 'Twould take a good many posts and cowboys to ek'al a steer!"

"You've been lying to those fellows out there," said Marshall, when he was closeted with Kansas Jim. "You're not hunting work, or I miss my guess."

"Glad you dropped to the little game so quick, cunnel! I am, so! Pow'ful glad! 'Twill save a good deal of explainifyin'. You're cuter than t'other fellers, er you wouldn't 'a' tumbled."

He felt in a pocket of his coat and brought out a letter. It was inclosed in a soiled, yellow envelope.

"Read it, cunnel. It will save words for both of us."

He slipped the letter from the envelope and extended it to Marshall. The letter read:

"PHILIP MARSHALL, Esq.—

"This will introduce you to James Kennedy, alias Kansas Jim. I have taken into consideration your request, and for two weeks past have been looking for a man to serve your purpose. I am satisfied Mr. Kennedy is the individual you want. His experience in detective work on the border has been very extensive, and his success marked. If there is any man in the country who can run the Raiders of the Range to their holes, and then snare them successfully, that man is Kansas Jim. Your old friend,

"JOHN CLINTON."

The ranchman read the communication with evident pleasure. John Clinton was a friend whom he knew he could trust.

"He has told you just what I want you to do?" looking from the letter to the waiting man.

"He give me some p'ints to think over, an' said as how you'd gimme the rest."

A conversation of some length followed, in which there was a general interchange of views, and a clearer understanding of the needs of the occasion.

At its close, Philip Marshall conducted Kansas Jim to the cowboys.

"I find that the story he tells is true," the ranchman affirmed, addressing the foreman, "and I have concluded to give him the place he seeks. You have seen that he is fairly expert with the rope, and he assures me that he has had experience in the cattle business. You will assign him to a bunk, and he will await your orders."

There were many grumbling remarks as the ranchman turned away. None of the men were more displeased, perhaps, than the foreman himself.

"A pretty stick to thrust in among us!" he declared to one of his confidants. "I'm afraid we'll have to learn him the cow business before he'll be of any use."

An idea came to Stevens, as he looked after the shuffling form of the new cowboy, and so strongly did it impress him, that he followed Kansas Jim to a point beyond ear-shot of the others.

"I say, pard," addressing him in a confidential tone, "how much of that story was true—the story you gave us when we first came on to you?"

Kansas Jim looked at his interlocutor in a bewildered way.

"Sphinxes of Egypt? What are you driving at?"

"Ye don't ketch on?"

"Nary ketch, pard. I strung it to you as straight as a string. So fur as this country is concerned, I'm a tenderfoot. Never set eyes on this buffler-grass plantation afore."

Stevens stared hard at him.

"I only thought!—"

He checked himself, and turned away without saying what he thought.

"By the great Vidocq! That's a chap that'll bear clost watchin'! He come purty nigh puttin' his foot into it that time. It'd pay him to buy a ten-cent padlock an' fasten it to his mouth. He had a spicion that I was one of the Raiders, myself; an' if he don't know more about Big Head Mike than he pretends to, then I'm a-navigatin' these seas without bearin' er compass."

CHAPTER III. A NECKTIE PARTY.

WHETHER or not the detective was correct in his surmise concerning Stevens, the latter certainly felt a great distrust of the new man, and immediately began to foment trouble. At various times that afternoon, Kansas Jim saw the foreman surrounded by a group of cronies to whom he was earnestly talking. The detective guessed the meaning of these gatherings, but he paid no apparent heed to them, and went quietly about the work assigned him.

Stevens had given him some very onerous tasks, but Kansas Jim made no comments thereat. The character of the work, however, drew the attention of Kitty Marshall, who usually shared the secrets of her father, and the fact that the foreman had hastened to thrust menial work on the new-comer did not serve to raise her would-be lover in her estimation.

Shortly before nightfall Stevens approached Kansas Jim. He was accompanied by one of his cowboys, and there were indications of suppressed anger in their manner.

"See here," he said, somewhat angrily, but in a low tone, "I've been having a talk with the boys, and we've come to the conclusion that it won't be healthy for you to stay here. You've pulled the wool over the eyes of the old man, but you can't fool us. We know who you are, and the sooner you cut sticks, the better it will be for you."

There was a trace of mild surprise in the crossed eyes of the new cowboy.

"You'll hev to put it plainer, pardner. Ye will, so! I'm free to say I don't know jist what you're a-drivin' at."

"I'll make it plainer, then. We've figured out that you're one of Big Head Mike's men. There's no use denying it, for we know you are!"

Kansas Jim stared helplessly about him.

"Shadders o' wrath, pardner! You're away off in yer reck'nin'! This big-headed gen'leman an' me aire total strangers. Neither me ner Boomerang ever sot eyes on him. Them's the facts."

"You can make Phil Marshall believe that, but you can't make us. We ought to have shot you when we caught you, instead of bringing you here."

"That mightn't 'a' been so easy, seein' that I had the drop on you," and Kansas Jim chuckled gleefully at the recollection. "If I'd 'a' gone down, ther'd 'a' been some o' you a-eatin' dirt along of me—several ov ye, I reckon."

"Will you leave the place or not?" a black look overspreading his face. "We're not in the humor to stand this sort of nonsense. If you'll take your horse and go quietly away, no harm shall come to you, if you don't, you'll have to suffer the consequences."

"Consequences be hanged, pardners!" smiling as cheerfully as if no threat had been uttered. "We're allus surrounded by consequences. I never done a thing yit, but what there was consequences a-follerin' of it. According to my idee, a man never dies tell his time comes. Otherwise, I'd 'a' been killed when I was a boy—for that sacred ox piled me into the river, an' come near a-drownin' me a dozen times. But I lived, an' the consequence is, I'm hyer. Consequences, pardners, never skeered me, yit."

The foreman's rage was terrible, but he managed to hold it in check.

"You won't go?"

"Go? Pardner, I'm s'prised at ye hintin' sich a thing. This is the fu'st job I've struck in a month, an' I'll be plagued if I give it up, nohow! Besides, there's Boomerang! He hain't seen shelled corn fer so long that it'd jist nacherally break his heart to take him away from it."

It was of no use to argue with such a man, and Stevens and his cowboys turned away, maddened and disgusted.

Kansas Jim felt thankful in his heart that he had been thus warned. He was more and more convinced that Stevens was a man that would bear watching, and that night when he repaired to his bunk, he carefully deposited his pistols where he could get them at the first sound of danger.

For hour after hour he lay there awake, listening to the breathing of the men about him, and resolved not to give himself up to slumber. But it was easier to resolve than to carry out the resolution. In spite of his determined efforts to keep awake, the drowsy god finally overcame him; and when he did fall asleep, his slumbers were deep, for the fatigues and excitements of the day had been exhausting.

The hour was extremely late, and all the cowboys of the Double-Bar Ranch were seemingly as oblivious to the passage of time as was the

detective. But this was only seeming. Stevens was awake, and so were a number of others he had taken into his confidence.

When the heavy breathing of Kansas Jim betokened that deep sleep had overtaken him, Stevens quietly got up from his bunk in another part of the room. The eyes of his confederates had been on him, and they arose also, all of them—a half-dozen in number—passing silently out into the open air.

Here they lingered for a little while, conversing in earnest, guarded tones. Then they returned to the bunk-room, and stealthily approached the cot whereon the detective lay. Their movements resembled those of creeping cats, and were as cruelly suggestive.

And still Kansas Jim slept, forgetful of evil, and mayhap dreaming of past events in happier days.

Stevens had a horse-blanket in one hand, and one of his companions held some knotted ropes.

With a quick, but noiseless movement, the foreman tossed the blanket over the head of the slumbering man, and then placed his broad palm upon the detective's mouth, to keep him from crying out. It was very cleverly done; and his comrades, coming to his assistance, they lifted the entrapped man and carried him out, in spite of his frenzied struggles—for the choking blanket had awakened him—and without attracting the notice of the other sleepers.

Once outside the building, they moved rapidly in the direction of the horse-stables, which were not far from the house. These stables were built of poles brought from the foot-hills, and a number of the rafters projected for a considerable distance beyond the roofs. Their intentions were murderous, and one of these projecting rafters, with a lariat, would form a convenient gallows.

The foreman had laid his plans carefully, and it seemed that success must attend them.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, he had worked diligently on the feelings of the men as he knew he could trust. He had not dared to approach all of them. He had succeeded in convincing the men selected, that Kansas Jim was a member of Big Head Mike's Range Raiders, and that he ought, therefore, to be put out of the way.

The average cowboy has little sympathy for a cattle-lifter, as little as he has for a horse-thief, and will not hesitate to string one up at the first opportunity. These men whom Stevens had taken into his confidence were honest fellows, in the main, and hated Big Head Mike's men with a bitter hatred; and when they felt sure Kansas Jim belonged to this dastardly set, they readily fell in with the foreman's scheme.

Kansas Jim realized to the full extent his peril, and made a desperate fight for liberty. But he was helpless against this combined force; and besides, he was greatly hampered, and almost choked with the suffocating blanket.

When the stables were reached, a rafter was selected; after which, the noose of the lariat was dropped over the head of the doomed man. The blanket had not been removed, and his hands and feet were now deftly tied.

"Now, swing him up, boys!" came the low command from Stevens. "It will be a warning to Big Head Mike and his men!"

The rope had been passed over the rafter, and those holding the loose end surged heavily on it.

But there came an interruption. The detective's feet had left the ground, and he was swinging and choking in mid-air.

"Lower that man! At once!"

The voice was Kitty Marshall's.

Never were men so thunderstruck as were Stevens and his companions. The voice of the girl came as the voice of doom to their startled ears.

Kitty Marshall had been suspicious throughout the entire evening, fearing foul play for the stranger. In consequence, she had scarcely been able to close her eyes that night. The windows of her room commanded a fair view of the stables, and although the darkness was so dense she could not see, yet the slight commotion caused by the would-be murderers in their movements had reached her, for the night was warm and the windows of her room were hoisted.

She knew instinctively that something was wrong, and as soon as she could dress, hastened down to investigate, and so arrived at a most opportune moment.

As her words cut sharply on the still air, the men holding the rope involuntarily let go of it, and the detective fell to the ground in a limp heap and with a crash.

"Mr. Stevens, I am astonished!" the words biting like keenest knife-blades. "Is this the way you obey my father's command?"

The foreman was almost paralyzed. He had meant to hang Kansas Jim, and by pretending to be horrified at the discovery, in the morning, hoped to avert suspicion from himself and his assistants. The revelation of his double-dealing was a blow he felt.

Stevens was madly in love with pretty Kitty Marshall, and had cherished hopes of some day winning her for his bride. These hopes now seemed dashed to the ground.

He could not find words in which to reply, and his men shrinking back into the cover of the darkness, left him to face the girl alone.

At this moment Kansas Jim partially regaining his consciousness, uttered a groan, and began to writhe convulsively; seeing which, the girl darted to his side and removed the rope and the blanket.

"Miss Marshall, I—I—"

"Don't speak to me, sir!" waving him back with an imperious gesture. "How dare you speak to me, after this?"

Stevens was crushed.

"He is one of the cattle-thieves," he protested.

"Will you leave me, sir?" with a frigidity that struck him dumb. "If you have any explanations, make them to my father."

"Stay!" calling him back. "If you have any manhood, help me to carry this gentleman into the house. Then you can go!"

Stevens obeyed without a word, lifting the detective bodily, and bearing him toward the ranch-house.

Seeing that her services were not required, Kitty Marshall ran on ahead, and by vigorous raps and calls, succeeded in arousing her father.

By the time he appeared, however, Kansas Jim had fully recovered consciousness, and Stevens was gone, unable longer to endure the girl's icy hauteur and indignation.

CHAPTER IV.

KITTY MARSHALL'S REQUEST.

PHILIP MARSHALL's wrath was great, when he learned what had occurred, and the foreman and the men engaged with him in the cowardly attempt were forced to make abject apologies. Not only were they compelled to apologize to Marshall himself, but to Kansas Jim also; and to Stevens this was gall and wormwood. But he had to do it, Marshall told him, or instantly quit the ranch.

Marshall took advantage of this occasion to deliver a lecture to the men on their duty to him as employees, and to point out the nefariousness of the scheme of the night, in words that were decidedly emphatic.

Kitty, still fearing for the life of Kansas Jim, summoned to her side a young cowboy named Wingate Osgood, and addressed him earnestly on the subject.

Win Osgood was a youth of comely manners, somewhat modest and retiring, but as much a man in all things as the most experienced cowboy there. To him Kitty Marshall was little less than an angel—a woman to be worshiped afar off, as one might adore a goddess, but not to be sullied by thoughts of a more earthly nature. He felt that she was far above him, so far above him, that it was almost sacrilege to think she could ever descend to a level with himself.

In addition to this, even if he had dreamed in his wildest visions of ever winning her for his very own, he felt that Luke Stevens was a rival who must prove invincible. He knew that Stevens loved her, and fancied that she returned the affection.

It may be that Kitty Marshall shrewdly guessed something of this when she invited Win Osgood into the house, for the purpose of conversing with him on the matter now uppermost in her mind. Had she seen into the depths of his heart, she must have known that she could summon to her aid no more loyal ally than this young cowboy.

"You know what happened last night?" questioningly, looking placidly into the confused face of the young man. "I want to talk to you about that."

Osgood stammered out his willingness to hear anything she desired to say.

"I have selected you, Mr. Osgood, because I feel I can trust you more fully than any of the others."

Osgood reddened pleasurable at the compliment, but remained silent.

"Something tells me that the attempt of last night will be repeated, sooner or later. Perhaps not in the same way. In fact, it's not likely that the danger will come again in the same way, for Mr. Kennedy will be on guard against treachery of that kind."

"I am glad you were not engaged in the affair, and that you are not the kind of man Mr. Stevens would think of approaching on such a subject. I am right in believing he did not speak to you about it, am I not?"

"I knew nothing of it, whatever," Osgood affirmed.

"I was sure of it. Now what I want you to do, and I make it as a personal request, is to watch Luke Stevens constantly, especially when there seems the slightest chance that this thing may recur. Will you do it?"

"I will, if you wish it!" and there was the ring of truth in the tones.

"Thank you; I knew you would. It would have been better and safer if father had sent Stevens adrift, and got a new foreman. I wanted him to, and he would have acceded to my wishes, if it hadn't been for Kansas Jim, himself."

"I don't know why Mr. Kennedy should wish Stevens to remain after what has occurred. No doubt he has good reasons. I am assured he fully understands his peril, and is prepared for whatever may come; but he is only one man against many and should have aid. That aid you can give him."

Win Osgood bowed his assent, jealously wondering if it could be possible she had fallen in love with Kansas Jim! He put the thought from him as unworthy to be harbored. The disparity between her and Kansas Jim was so great as to make the fancy wholly absurd.

As she talked, Osgood noticed a shadow on the curtain of the window. He had seen it there before, and thought it produced by the waving branches of a tree which drooped against that side of the house; but the shadow had changed in a manner to show that it was something far different. *It was the shadow of a man!*

Osgood was usually accounted a cool head, and at this moment his calmness did not forsake him. Still listening to her, he shifted his chair as if the draught from the door was unpleasant. In thus moving the chair, he managed to so locate himself that he could look out through the narrow slit between the curtain and the side of the window. What he saw brought a most unpleasant shock, though it only confirmed his first surmise.

The eavesdropper at the window was Luke Stevens, and he had doubtless overheard everything Kitty Marshall had said!

Osgood did not reveal his discovery to the girl, thinking it not the part of wisdom, and fearing, too, that Stevens would hear him should he do so.

The eavesdropper, however, became distrustful at this change in Osgood's position, and moved softly away.

The words that followed, Osgood scarcely heard, though Kitty Marshall continued to talk in the same strain. Ought he to tell her? he again and again asked himself. Jealousy prompted him to do so. It was apparent that Stevens had already fallen greatly in her estimation, and a revelation of this last exhibition of baseness must forever ruin him in her eyes.

In spite of the turmoil that seethed in his breast, he yet caught the general drift of her remarks, and succeeded in answering so coherently and intelligently, that she gained no inkling of the thoughts that were disturbing him.

Over and over, the question recurred to him, and two or three times he came near yielding to the great temptation. But he quelled the fierce desire.

"You will do these things faithfully?" she asked. "Be in secret a friend to Kansas Jim, and watch over his welfare as you would over that of a brother you dearly love. Remember that I trust you implicitly."

"And you shall not trust in vain!" he declared, his words as earnest as her own. "For your sake, I will be as true a friend to Kansas Jim as he ever had!"

CHAPTER V.

A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE.

To all outward appearances, Luke Stevens was a repentant and humble man. He had confessed himself in error, and cravenly begged forgiveness of the ranch-owner, for if there was one thing more than another that the foreman desired, it was to remain at the Double-Bar. If driven from the place, all hope of ever gaining the love of pretty Kitty Marshall would be at an end.

That this could now be accomplished seemed a matter of the greatest uncertainty; and Stevens raged inwardly as he recalled her scath-

ing words. He would have given much to be able to blot out the events of that night.

The cowboys who had been so willing in lending their aid in disposing of the detective, felt quite as sore over the disclosure of their complicity in the affair as did Stevens himself; and these stood ready to give him hearing in any new scheme.

Nothing occurred of a suspicious character, however, and two days passed very quietly in the usual routine of the ranch.

The night of the second day held in store its share of surprises. Nothing had transpired to give warning of what was coming. Stevens and many of the cowboys had been absent throughout the day, looking for some missing cattle; and when night came, they retired early, worn out with fatigue.

It was a quiet night, dark where the shadows of the building fell, but lighter on the open stretches of prairie. A night for calm and serious thinking, for the stars twinkled with a brilliancy that naturally drew one's thoughts from minor things to the glory of the heavens and the grandeur of the universe.

It was too solemn and beautiful a night to be marred by sounds of an earthly conflict; but the conflict came, in the nature of a surprise, as such things usually do.

A number of cattle had been driven in from the range, that day, and were peacefully slumbering in a body on the grassy carpet not far off. They were to be started to the railway, on the morrow, for shipment to the East.

Suddenly there came the pounding of hoof-beats, then a series of yells, as if a score of wild Comanches had been loosed on the peaceful plain. Instantly the cattle were scattered in terror, and stampeding in all directions, and the cry arose that the Raiders had again come.

The cowboys streamed from the bunk-house, half-dressed, and ran toward the corral and stables for their saddle-ponies. A deafening confusion reigned. The cowboys screamed and shouted to each other, the Range Raiders yelled and shook their blankets, and the terror-stricken cattle lumbered away in a rolling gallop that caused the ground to quiver.

No man there was quicker on his feet, or seemed better to understand the demand of the occasion, than Kansas Jim. He did not rush for his poky old horse, Boomerang, as one might have anticipated, but selected a young broncho of considerable speed and mettle. This he saddled and bridled in an inconceivably short space of time, being mounted and ready for the fray almost before any other man there.

Luke Stevens was nearly as quick, being but a few yards behind the detective, as they rode toward the yelling Raiders. After them streamed the cowboys, falling into line as rapidly as possible.

"This way!" called Stevens, anxious to redeem himself in Marshall's eyes, and paying no heed to the fact that such directions were useless while the Raiders' cries rose so strongly. "This way! Crowd 'em hard! Don't let the rascals get away from you this time!"

He struck the spurs into his horse, and sitting his saddle like a centaur, rode toward the retreating men. Kansas Jim was still in advance of him, and a suspicious observer might have noted that Luke Stevens hung close at the detective's heels.

The horses ridden by Stevens and Kansas Jim were the fleetest on the ranch, and speedily drew away from the others.

It was a foolish, mad chase, anyway, conducted as it was.

Kansas Jim had his own motives, however, for the course he was pursuing. He was anxious to see who the men were that composed this band of Raiders. He fancied he knew some of them, and believed that if he could draw near enough to them while they were yelling, he could recognize their voices, and thus settle an important point.

The gloom of the night hid the cowboys from these two who were in advance, a circumstance very gratifying just then to the foreman. He plied the spurs with such renewed vigor that his broncho shot alongside that of the detective.

"We must push them, now!" he exclaimed, speaking to Kansas Jim in the friendliest of tones. "Oh, if the boys were only here! They're coming along too slow!"

He placed his fingers to his lips and blew a blast that was sharp and penetrating.

"That will bring them if anything will," he asserted. "The scamps are swinging the cattle in toward the hills. But they can't get away with them to-night. We'll get the bulge on them pretty soon, for the cattle can't run like horses."

He had continued to dig the spurs into the flanks of his horse, keeping close to the detective. This was a thing very distasteful to Kansas Jim, and not at all in accordance with his plans. He had good reason to doubt the friendliness of this man.

"You go around that way, and I'll go this," ordered Stevens, after they had raced together for perhaps five minutes. "We can accomplish more."

He again put his hands to his lips and sent that shrill blast echoing over the prairie.

Then he wheeled his animal and rode in a different direction.

Kansas Jim was glad to be rid of his company, but was given no time for congratulations. A half-dozen horsemen seemed to spring out of the ground; so suddenly did they appear before him. He had not heard a hoof-beat; and so sure was he that they had been standing there, arranged in a semi-circle and waiting for him to ride into their midst, that he attempted to turn his steed and dash away.

He was too near them to accomplish this; all he did being to throw his horse on its haunches and bring it to a halt, enabling them to close about him more effectively.

That they were members of the Range Raiders, he could not doubt.

"Good evenin', gentlemen!" he said, with the greatest calmness, as his ears caught the ominous "click, click," of revolvers, and he saw that he could not escape. "I hope you'll not detain me! Flyin' wings o' time, no! I've got a most pressin' engagement."

For answer one of the men grasped his bridle-rein, and another, springing down, took him by the foot.

"Git down off'n that hoss!" was the stern command. "We don't keer about hearing any of your palaverin'! Git down, er I'll bore a hole through ye!"

"But, cunnel," lifting his hands, protestingly, "time's a-passin'! I'd like to oblige ye, I really would, but every hoof o' them cattle is a-racin' to destruction, just like the swine o' Scripter."

"Git off that hoss, an' shet yer yawp!"

"I see they ain't no resistin' of ye," with a gurgling chuckle. "Of course I'll git down. Shadders o' wrath! I'd be a fool not to!"

Another horseman had come to the assistance of the one who had caught the detective by the foot, and as Kansas Jim climbed slowly out of the saddle, they grasped him to make sure he could not get away. He saw that resistance would be worse than useless, and made no effort to prevent them as they proceeded to bind him. But he did make the muscles of his wrists as tense as possible, that the bonds might lie the looser after the knots had been secured.

A blanket was swung between two ponies; and when Kansas Jim had been tied to the satisfaction of his captors, he was deposited in this blanket. It formed a stretcher, such as is frequently used on the prairies in carrying wounded or injured men.

The riders of the animals then mounted to their places in the saddles, and the whole party set off at a brisk gait.

The effort to drive away the cattle had apparently been abandoned; for the detective, as he swung in his uneasy hammock, could hear the cowboys of the Double-Bar as they raced hither and thither, calling to each other as they endeavored to bunch and turn the frightened animals. He even fancied that he once or twice heard the voice of Luke Stevens, shouting commands to his followers.

A bitter smile swept over the face of the helpless detective. The Raiders had him at last in their power, but little Old Jim cared for that. The capture and signals, and all proved beyond cavil, that the foreman was in communication with Big Head Mike's Raiders, and that those keen whistles were purposely intended to summon the Raiders to the capture of old Kansas he had not the least doubt.

Jim thought this all over, as he was swung along in the blanket, and came to the conclusion that Stevens had paid a visit to the Raiders, that day, while he was pretending to hunt for the missing cattle.

Another thought came with it: Knowing, as all indications went to show they did, that Kansas Jim was a detective who had come there for the purpose of running them down and bringing them to justice, would they hesitate to kill him, now that they had him in their power?

He felt that they would not; and thus feeling, resolved to escape at the first opportunity.

His captors had not made a very efficient search of his person when they bound him, and

a knife in a pocket of his coat had not attracted their attention. How to get it, though, was the puzzle.

For a time he writhed and twisted, his movements escaping observation because of the motion of the horses. At length he succeeded in crowding the pocket up against his mouth, and by carefully tearing the lining away with his teeth, extracted the knife. He opened it also with his teeth; and then holding the handle in his mouth, sawed with the blade against the cords that held his wrists.

The blade was keen, and it required barely a minute's work to cut away the thongs. His hands now being free, he experienced no difficulty whatever in removing the cords from his feet.

He remained quiet for a time after accomplishing this, trying to determine just where they were. By peeping over the edge of the swaying blanket, he could gain a fair view of surrounding objects, in spite of the gloom. A well-known landmark flitted by; and he knew that just beyond it there was an *arroya* whose bottom was overgrown with bushes and stunted trees.

He could not see the trees in the *arroya*, but when he believed they were opposite it, he threw himself quickly out of the stretcher, falling rather heavily and being dragged some distance by the onward movement.

Of course his escape was instantly discovered, and as he sprung up and ran in the direction of the shelter, a dozen revolvers were fired at him. He had anticipated this, but preferred the risk, knowing that under the influence of excitement and because of the darkness, the aim of the best marksman must be execrable.

None of the balls came near him, and though the horses were turned in instant pursuit, he easily gained the *arroya* and let himself down to the bottom.

The outwitted Raiders filled the air with imprecations, and fired shot after shot into the black depths. Then regaining a little of their native common sense, they dismounted and began a search, stopping to listen now and then, in the hope of hearing the movements of the hunted man.

The *arroya* was a full half-mile in length, and it was impossible to beat it thoroughly in the darkness.

Kansas Jim did not go a dozen steps from the point where he had descended; but finding a spot under the lee of a rock, he crouched there, while the angry Raiders beat the bushes in every direction about him.

Convinced that he had run on down the *arroya*, they moved in that direction, leaving him to breathe freer, and consider his situation.

"There'll be a foreman mighty badly broke up, when I shows myself at the ranch ag'in, an' that I'll do before mornin'!" he grimly chuckled. "He'll be a-cryin' his eyes out. Weepin' willers, yes! I wouldn't miss seein' of it fer a circus. No, not fer two of 'em, an a sacred ox throwd in!"

CHAPTER VI.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

WIN OSGOOD had not been unmindful of the injunctions of Kitty Marshall. He had been close to Kansas Jim and Stevens when their horses sprung away from the corral. He was not so well mounted as they, but his animal was a speedy one, and he pushed him hard in his efforts to keep near enough to observe what Stevens did.

He paid no heed whatever to the other cowboys, nor to the Raiders and the cattle, but gave his entire attention to the man he was following.

He heard the whistles of the foreman, and wondered at them, for, as a rule, Luke Stevens did not use such calls when commanding his men.

He was a considerable distance to the rear when Stevens parted from the detective and the latter ran into the trap prepared for him. He continued on, however, until near enough to see the group of men, then veered to one side, knowing the cowboys would not thus assemble, and made suspicious thereby.

When far enough to escape observation, he hopped his horse, and crept back toward the horsemen. He heard the whining, drawling voice of Kansas Jim, and the gruff orders of the outlaw leader, and knew that all was not right.

When the party moved away, he ran back to his horse, keeping far enough behind them to hear the sounds they made in their retreat, and still not be noticed himself. He was aided in this by the careering here and there of the cowboys.

The Raiders were probably a quarter of a mile in advance of him when Kansas Jim made his escape into the *arroya*. He heard the revolver-shots and the commotion and confusion that followed. Thinking it would not be safe to proceed further on horseback, he again hopped his animal and crept forward on foot. He was acquainted with the position of the *arroya*, and when a little nearer became convinced that Kansas Jim was concealed within it, and that the Raiders were searching for him.

Fears for his own security induced him to keep well in the background, until the outlaws passed on toward the other end of the *arroya*. He then crawled to the big rift's edge, and lying flat on the ground, listened long and carefully.

The Raiders were almost beyond earshot, and lifting his voice, he called softly to the detective:

"Are you in there, Kennedy?" he questioned. "It's me, Win Osgood! I've been following, hoping a chance to help you."

Kansas Jim heard the words, but he did not immediately reply. He was considering whether or not it would be wise to do so.

So long did he remain silent, that Osgood was on the point of crawling further down the *arroya*'s edge, when, as if he had arisen out of the ground, Kansas Jim appeared beside him.

"It does these hyer cross-eyes good to see ye! Wickedness o' Babylon! Them fellers air cantankerous! They'd perforate both of us if they got a chance!"

The shrill neigh of Osgood's horse came sharply to them. It had scented the animals of the Raiders. As if in answer, the outlaws came racing back up the *arroya*, knowing from the direction the sound came, it was not made by one of their own animals.

"Shall we run for it?" Osgood questioned, trembling under the influence of his intense excitement.

"Twouldn't do no good. Your horse couldn't carry us both, an' we'd both be tuck. If we were jist a little nearer to their bronchos, I'd say to make a break, but they'd beat us in that race, shore. Gracious goodness! Of course! If we don't want to fall into their clutches, we'd better slide back into this hole, and mighty quick, too."

The wisdom of this was evident, and together they climbed down the rough wall of the dry water channel, and not too soon, for almost at the same moment, the outlaws bore down on the point they had just quitted.

"Most gives a feller the creeps to hear 'em rumpin' round in that way," Kansas Jim growled, peering up from his cover to the *arroya*'s rim. "I hope they won't go to slingin' lead ag'in down here."

Win Osgood echoed the wish.

Osgood was well armed, but the detective had only the pocket-knife which had aided him in his escape.

"Sh!" and Kansas Jim lifted a finger warningly, as a foot-fall sounded near.

One of the Raiders had descended into the *arroya*, and was advancing toward them, with so light a step that his near presence had until now escaped their notice.

The warning came too late. Osgood's low-spoken words had come to the ears of the man. He did not fire as they feared he might, but drew back behind the shelter of a rock, and briskly sung out:

"Hyer he is, boys, an' I b'lieve there's some 'un with him! Tumble down them rocks lively, er they'll git away! There they go, hem 'em in at that end!"

Osgood and the detective, seeing they could no longer remain in that place, had scrambled into the bushes and beat a retreat.

The wildest excitement prevailed on the prairie above, as these words rung out, and in obedience to their instructions, a number of the Raiders ran along the *arroya*'s edge to prevent an escape below.

It was plain to the encompassed men that they could not scale the walls and gain the prairie, and it was equally plain that if they remained there they were in the greatest danger of discovery and capture.

Some of the Raiders speedily descended into the *arroya* beyond them, thus inclosing them in a complete cordon.

"We'llhev to make a fight of it!" Kansas Jim asserted. "Otherwise, we're gone goslin' in."

He drew Osgood into an inclosure of sheltering rocks.

"Tain't no use to run any furder!" he panted. "Whichever way we go we're bound to run slap into them fellers! If I only had a pistol!"

Win handed him his,

"Take it; no doubt you can use it better than I can."

"Thank'ee! If they crowd us now, somebody'll git sudden sick? Bows an' arrows o' Nimrod! Yes!"

A shower of revolver-shots screamed through the bushes in their vicinity. The outlaws found it difficult to locate them, and had adopted this method of routing them out.

"Hug the rocks!" Kansas Jim whispered. "They're not likely to hit us in hyer, if they don't go to shootin' from above!"

The rattle of the revolvers was answered by a loud cheer, a cheer that caused a cessation of hostilities on the part of the outlaws.

"The ranch boys are coming!" Win exclaimed, gleefully.

Now that silence had fallen on the *arroya*, the clatter of hoofs could be distinctly heard. The pistol-firing had come to the ears of the man of the ranch, and thinking that a fight was in progress between some of their own number and the outlaws, they were hurrying to take a hand in the *melee*.

Needless to state their action was not at command of Luke Stevens; though, when the cowboys sprung to their saddles and started in the direction of the shooting, he knew he could not remain behind without exciting distrust, and so was in the lead, shouting with the loudest.

The Raiders understood the meaning of the cheers; and, scrambling to their ponies, made off in hot haste.

"Boss, you hev my thanks!" Kansas Jim declared, crawling from the *arroya*, and looking comically up into the foreman's face. "You hev, shore! But fer you, we'd hev been gobbled by them tarantulas, an' no mistake! Weepin' sorrier! Yes!"

Luke Stevens could scarcely conceal his supreme disgust at the turn of events, but he was forced to choke down his humiliation and anger, and feign a pleasure he was far from feeling.

And Kansas Jim, profuse in his thanks, insisted on mounting behind him and riding with him to the ranch.

CHAPTER VII.

A SURREPTITIOUS MEETING.

LUKE STEVENS heard little of the chatter of the queer-looking man perched on the pony behind him, but what little he did hear, only made him wish the more that he could stick a knife into the heart of the impudent fellow and silence him forever. The foreman's thoughts were absorbing, and not of the pleasantest. Things had gone woefully wrong with him in the last few days. Twice had he failed in his attempts on the detective's life. What should he do now? He feared that suspicion was already rife against him, and felt that he must play his cards with the greatest care, or he would be overtaken by something worse than defeat.

On his arrival at the ranch, he sought an interview with Philip Marshall; and the result was, that when he came out of the house, he announced his intention of making a visit to Broad Horn City, on the following day. The cattle had been recovered, and as was his custom, he intended to confer with Marshall's agent in regard to the shipping.

Broad Horn City, so named because it was a great shipping point for range cattle, was the nearest town on the railway. It was a "city" only in name, being merely a collection of board houses strung along one street leading to the depot and stock-yards.

The thought that had troubled Luke Stevens the night before, remained with him, as he cantered easily along in the direction of the cattle-town.

He was revolving plans for the overthrow of the detective who was so annoying him. Until the coming of Kansas Jim, he had had no fears that he would be detected in the double part he was playing. This visit to Broad Horn City was but a blind. He had no real desire to go there, but meant to visit the mountains, and was forced to visit the "city" first to avoid suspicion.

When within about ten miles of the railway, he turned sharply and entered the foot-hills which encroached on the plains at that point.

Beyond the first spur of hills, he found a little valley in which a number of horses were grazing. From his manner it was certain he knew of their presence there.

Here he turned his own horse loose to graze and rest; and, capturing one of the others, transferred the saddle and bridle to its back.

When he had done this, he rode again into the plains, and in the direction of Broad Horn City.

He did not tarry long on arriving at the latter place; but, as soon as his conference with the agent was ended, took the first opportunity of leaving the town. Once beyond the range of vision, he dug the spurs cruelly into his animal and rode with furious speed for the little valley.

On reaching it this second time, he made another transfer of the saddle and bridle, selecting a fresh broncho, and plunged straight into the hills.

For more than two hours, he urged the pony on at its best gait, choosing the route so certainly and unerringly, that it was plain it was very familiar to him.

At a secluded point in these hills, he came upon a group of men sitting by a camp-fire preparing their noonday meal. They leaped to their feet and drew their weapons, as they heard the clatter of his horse's feet on the rocks; but their warlike attitude vanished when they saw who it was.

Several of them advanced and greeted him warmly; the foremost, and the leader apparently, being a burly, muscular individual, with a head enormously large in proportion to the size of his body.

This was the notorious Big Head Mike; and he it was, Stevens had been at so much pains to see.

"We've been a-lookin' for ye," Big Head Mike stated, grasping Stevens by the hand, as the latter swung out of the saddle. "We didn't 'low, though, that you'd git here so soon."

"I've ridden like a Mazeppa," the foreman affirmed, returning the hand-clasp and greeting Big Head Mike's followers. "I was determined to see you; and to keep the old man from looking on me with a jealous eye, I'll have to get back to the ranch by nightfall. I think he suspects me already, and I don't want to give him occasion for anything further in that line."

The long, hard ride had made him hungry, and he took a seat with the men about the fire and proceeded to greedily devour a generous portion of the meat they were cooking.

"You fellows couldn't work the thing last night, eh?" broaching the thought uppermost in the minds of all.

Big Head Mike laughed in a harsh, hard way.

"The scamp was too much for the whole of us!" he confessed; and then went on to detail the manner in which Kansas Jim had escaped from them.

Luke Stevens listened attentively.

"Well, as I told you before, we've got to do something to silence him. I've got word straight, that he's a detective; and I fear that Marshall knows it and will stand by him. Several things lately have gone to confirm this."

"I reckon we'll have to lay another trap for him," Big Head Mike asserted. "We're with you in that line, whatever you want to do."

"There is another thing I want to speak about," tapping the leader of the Raiders confidentially on the shoulder, when the meal was concluded.

Big Head Mike followed him to a point some distance beyond the others.

"Spit it out! What is it? I don't 'low it would have been any harm if the boys had heard it. They're all right!"

"I suppose they are, but I don't like to trust everybody. The people at the ranch always thought I was all right; and I hope they think so still. But it makes me careful."

Big Head Mike shuffled uneasily on his heavy legs, as he waited for the foreman to continue.

"It's about the girl," hesitatingly. "She's thrown me over, bodily."

His dark face took on a scowl that drove all the beauty from his features.

"I was afraid it was something of the kind," showing his uneasiness by wrinkling his forehead and thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. "Let the women alone, that's my motto. If you can't win her by fair means, don't try foul. They're a nuisance and a bother, anyway, and are allus gittin a man into hot water."

"I thought perhaps you might be willing to help me in the matter!" Stevens continued, heedless of this discouraging speech.

He then proceeded to unfold the plan that had come to him.

When they were through talking, they returned to the fire, and took up the subject which had been there dropped.

He remained an hour with the outlaws, then rode away as he had come, and after securing his own horse in the valley, continued on toward the Double-Bar.

CHAPTER VIII. A WARNING MESSAGE.

"THIS is strange!"

Philip Marshall, the owner of the Double-Bar, wrinkled his brows thoughtfully as he stared at the letter he held in his hands.

It was nearly a week after the visit of Luke Stevens to Big Head Mike's men. Affairs had gone on very smoothly at the ranch, during this interval. The shipment of cattle had been made, and the returns from the same were hourly expected. The prices promised had been good; more cattle would soon be ready for the market; and altogether, things were moving pleasantly for the ranchman.

There was but one thing to trouble, and that was the ever-present fear of the Raiders. They had been very quiet, however, since the last attempt; and Marshall hoped that their failure on that occasion, combined with the presence of Kansas Jim, would deter them from further efforts.

He had been thinking of Kansas Jim, when the letter was received; and singularly enough, the letter concerned that individual; and it was not very complimentary or kindly in tone.

It had come with the usual batch of letters brought out weekly from Broad Horn City, and was from a gentleman in that town, a man of integrity, with whom Marshall was on friendly, and even intimate terms. This fact, and the contents of the letter, was what brought forth the exclamation.

This is what Philip Marshall had read:

"MR. PHILLIP MARSHALL:—

"DEAR FRIEND:—I have information of a most important character, which I hasten to communicate to you. From a very reliable source I learn that the man now at your ranch, who calls himself James Kennedy, or Kansas Jim, is a fraud of the first water. Not only that, but he is a scoundrel as well. The party recommending him to you was grossly deceived. I understand you believe him to be a detective, and have employed him to ferret out and break up the band of cattle-thieves known as the Range Raiders, and that other ranchmen who have suffered as you have, have combined with you, and that he professes to be serving you all. My information leads me to believe that the man is, himself, a member of Big Head Mike's men, and that he has imposed on you for the sole purpose of aiding them and giving them warning in time of danger. I should be chary in trusting him with any important secrets, for the chances are great that he will betray them at the first opportunity. I trust this warning may be early enough to be of benefit."

"Sincerely your friend,
THOMAS MASON."

It is little to be wondered at that Philip Marshall was shocked and bewildered by the communication. He had implicitly trusted Kansas Jim, and all the latter's acts since coming to the ranch had been of a character to increase his good opinion. In the first place, the detective—if he was a detective—had come recommended by an old personal friend; and in the second, the very bearing and manner of the eccentric fellow was calculated to impress on any one his truthfulness and fidelity.

Yet here was a letter, also from an old friend, stating that on good information, the writer believed the man to be a fraud and a wolf in sheep's clothing. One or the other of the writers was mistaken and deceived.

It was a puzzle and a mystery which Philip Marshall could not elucidate.

He heard his daughter's voice in another part of the house, and went to her with the letter for advice, as he commonly did when vexed or disturbed.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, when she had hurriedly glanced over the writing.

She was as much distressed and mystified as he had been.

"Surely, Mr. Mason must be mistaken!" she declared, her hands trembling as she re-read the letter. "I have had implicit confidence in Mr. Kennedy."

"So have I; and that's just the trouble. I don't know what to do. If this is true, he oughtn't to remain here another hour. If I could only trust the foreman!"

He felt the need of practical advice; but he realized that it would not be safe to go to Stevens for it.

"Can it be possible that this new man and the foreman are both connected with the Raiders?"

"If that was true, would Kennedy have accused Stevens, as he did?" she queried, in return.

"I'm sure I don't know. It would seem not. And, too, if Stevens is aiding the Raiders, as Kansas Jim has affirmed, why should the latter come here also to aid the Raiders?"

Kitty could not reply. To her it was all a bewildering tangle of doubt and uncertainty.

"Why not question Mr. Osgood?" she suggested. "He has been watching the new man at my request, and it may be that he has observed something that will throw light on the subject."

Marshall grasped at anything that offered an explanation; and going out of the house, called to Osgood, who was engaged in some work at the corral.

Osgood obeyed the summons, and was soon closeted with the two.

Marshall thrust the letter into his hands, and directed him to read it.

A look of surprise and dismay overspread the young man's face, as he took in the meaning of the communication.

"Do you suppose it is true?" he asked.

"We thought you might be able to enlighten us on that point."

"I think Mr. Mason is mistaken!" shaking his head emphatically.

In quick review the scenes in the *arroyo* rose before him, and to him they were convincing.

"Kansas Jim is not a traitor!" he declared. "I'm sure of it. Mr. Mason has been deceived. There can be no other explanation."

"I hope you are right," and a look of relief came to Marshall's face.

"I don't see how I can be wrong," Osgood declared, quickly running over the various points in favor of his theory.

"The strongest thing, Mr. Marshall, is this: On two occasions these men have attempted the life of this stranger. I needn't go into details. Would they have done that if he had been in sympathy with the Raiders?"

"You are taking it for granted that Luke Stevens is allied with them?" with a keen glance.

Osgood flushed, wondering if Marshall had discovered his secret attachment for Kitty, and suspected him of enmity to the foreman.

"I don't mean to make any charges against Mr. Stevens," apologetically. "I understand Kansas Jim brought those charges, but I don't wish to repeat them, for I know nothing of the matter."

"Perhaps we'd better drop all consideration of the first attack on Mr. Kennedy, and consider only the second attempt. That was certainly made by the Raiders."

"It was the act of the Raiders, yes. But I have heard it hinted since that they really had no unfriendly intentions toward him. That in fact, as he was one of their number, and in danger here, they simply desired to get him away from this perilous locality; and took this method of removing him."

The face of the young man was a study, as he listened to these words. He wanted to ask who had given this information.

Marshall interpreted his questioning glance.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to give it credence. It came from one of the men engaged in the hanging attempt the other night, and probably Stevens inspired the utterance. I didn't give it a second thought when it was broached, and should never have recurred to it possibly but for this letter."

"I can't believe Kansas Jim guilty until the evidence is stronger than it is now," Osgood announced. "I can't forget how those scamps sought for us in the *arroyo*, and showered their bullets into the darkness. They wouldn't have fired that way at a friend. It isn't the way such men usually act."

Kitty commended his fidelity with a grateful glance.

"Keep quiet about the matter," Marshall requested, "and be on the watch for anything that may serve to reveal the true from the false. I shall take steps to thoroughly investigate the subject, and you do likewise. Perhaps we can arrive at the truth before many days."

With these instructions, he thrust the letter into his pocket and ended the consultation.

CHAPTER IX.

SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

The doubts which troubled Philip Marshall were not dispelled by the occurrences of the following day. He expected to send Stevens to Broad Horn that afternoon on a matter of business connected with the ranch, and had laid by a sum of money for Stevens to deposit in the bank there.

This was his custom, and had been ever since Stevens entered his employ. The money had come from the sale of a bunch of cattle to a neighboring ranchman.

Marshall had no safe, for as a rule he kept very little cash in the house; and this money, which was in paper and gold, he had tied into a bundle and deposited in what he considered

a secure place. He had not even told his daughter where it was, and had felt certain no one observed him when he put it away.

Hence his dismay was great when he went to get it and found it missing.

Stevens was out on the range somewhere at the time, with a number of the cowboys, including Kansas Jim. They had been absent since early dawn.

Marshall looked everywhere for the missing package, in all sorts of possible and impossible places; and when he could not find it he called to Kitty, and together they fairly ransacked the house.

It was of no use. The money was gone, and no trace of it could be discovered.

He knew not whom to suspect. He thought, however, of Kansas Jim, as he recalled the damaging letter. Was it possible Jim had taken it?

His distrust of the detective was naturally increased. Many times he had kept money in the house in that way, and not until the coming of the new man had he ever missed a dollar. It seemed indeed strange; and comin' as it did on the heels of the accusing letter, perceptibly colored Philip Marshall's feelings.

While he was fuming over the missing package, and still vainly searching for it, Win Osgood hurriedly entered the house. His fine face was much troubled.

"I wish to speak to you, Mr. Marshall," his voice trembling a little in spite of his efforts at self-control.

Marshall came forward at once, accompanied by Kitty, who had overheard the request.

"I may be unduly suspicious, but there's something in the bunk-house I want you to look at."

He did not explain further, but when he saw that they meant to follow him, turned in the direction indicated.

"I may go along?" Kitty questioned, hesitating for a moment in the doorway.

"Certainly, if your father does not object."

Marshall knew from Osgood's look that there was nothing Kitty might not observe with propriety; and the three continued on toward the bunk-room.

"I came in here a while ago to get a whip," Osgood observed, as they filed into the building, "and that is what I saw. If there is anything concealed there, as it would seem, the work was very haphazardly done."

There was a little trail of fresh earth beneath Kansas Jim's cot, indicating that something had been concealed in the ground there. The earth was pressed down firmly, but the area of the excavation could be readily discerned.

"If anything is hidden there, it was most likely done in the night, and the bider could not see to remove all traces of his work."

Again the ranchman's mind flew to Kansas Jim. Could it be that the stolen money was there concealed?

"Everything is just as I first saw it," Osgood asserted, feeling almost as if he were committing a crime in thus pointing it out. "I was careful not to disturb anything until I had called you. You told me to keep my eyes open, and I have been endeavoring to do so."

There was an apology in the very tones.

"You did just right," the ranchman commented. "Now, if you'll help me to remove this cot, we'll soon find out if there's anything in there."

Osgood lent the desired aid; and when the cot had been removed, a spade was procured, and the excavation re-opened.

There was a great surprise in store for Osgood, for he knew nothing of the missing money. When the earth had been shoveled out, a shallow pit was revealed, at the bottom of which was the identical bag of money the ranchman had searched for that morning and found missing.

Osgood's ideas as to what might be buried there, were not very clear, but he certainly had not expected to find a bag of money. He started back with a cry of astonishment, as Marshall lifted the bag and shook it, and there came forth the chink of gold.

The countenances of Marshall and Kitty were troubled. The pleasure brought by the recovery of the missing money was almost dissipated by the circumstances surrounding its finding.

"This has a bad look," said Marshall, opening the bag to ascertain if all the money was there. "This was stolen from my room last night."

"Oh, father, it surely can't be that Mr. Kennedy took it!"

Marshall did not instantly reply. He was doing some very rapid thinking.

"I am inclined to agree with Miss Kitty," ventured Osgood. "It seems to me it would be

a folly of which Kansas Jim would not be guilty, to conceal the money thus beneath his own cot, and leave such tell-tale marks to betray him."

Osgood was loyal-hearted by nature.

"You forget that the hiding was done in the night," Marshall reminded.

"I had not forgotten it. It was in my thought, all the time. It is possible, of course, that in the haste with which the hiding was done, these traces might have been unintentionally left. Kansas Jim and the cowboys went away this morning before it was light enough to see."

"And that suggests," Kitty interpolated, "and suggests strongly, I think, that the work might have been done by an enemy who was anxious that Kansas Jim should leave here before daylight, so he could not see this trail of clay."

Osgood gave her a thankful look.

"You completed my idea."

"I presume you mean Luke Stevens?"

"I didn't intend to mention names," said Kitty, in reply to her father's question. "But Stevens was the one I was thinking of. He has shown that he is a most bitter enemy of Mr. Kennedy."

"And you think he hid the money there, knowing it would be found to the injury of Mr. Kennedy's reputation?"

"It is a subject to be looked into. But we mustn't tarry here. Some of the cowboys may come in, and I don't want them to see this."

He threw down the bag of money, and, taking the spade, quickly filled in the hole, Osgood assisting him in removing all traces of the work done. The cot was then set in place, and they retired to the house, conversing as they went.

"Now, tell me just what you think," Marshall requested, when they were safe from observation. "Either Kansas Jim is guilty, or there is devils' work going on here."

Thus encouraged, Osgood spoke out his thoughts.

"I know things are looking a little black for Kansas Jim; and this, coming on the heels of that letter, seemingly makes out a strong case against him. But the evidence is only circumstantial, and innocent men are said to have been hanged on circumstantial evidence. My suggestion is, that we do not, even in our minds, convict the man until we have more proof."

"I might be more easily convinced of his guilt, if it wasn't for our joint experience in the *arroyo*. Kansas Jim did not act then like a man would who was in collusion with the Raiders. I cannot believe he is a thief."

Kitty Marshall was inclined to the same opinion; and the result of the conference was, that they agreed to keep quiet about the matter, as they had concluded to maintain silence respecting the letter.

"No doubt there will be other developments," Marshall assured, "and we can wait. No great harm has been done so far. If an enemy stole this money and hid it beneath Kennedy's cot for the purpose of getting him into trouble, he will not hesitate to do other things of the same character. Very probably, by watching closely, we can arrive at the truth, before many days."

Shortly before noon, Stevens returned with Kansas Jim and the cowboys. Osgood observed them narrowly as they came into the bunk-house. The detective was the same rollicking, good-natured individual he had always seemed, and never once looked toward the cot, as Osgood had concluded he would do, if he were guilty. Luke Stevens, on the contrary, glanced hastily in that direction, the first thing on entering.

His expression was not lost on the watcher. There was a troubled, furtive appearance in his eyes, and he seemed nervous and restless.

If guilty, he had noted the removal of the trail of loose soil, and no doubt his mind was filled with sardines as to the effect the discovery had had on the ranchman.

"He is the guilty party," the young man thought. "I feel certain of it. I'd give a good deal to know just what he is thinking of now. It might settle a good many questions."

Luke Stevens was a careful man, however, and did not suffer his thoughts to betray themselves. He was anxious enough, probably, but he managed to conceal his feelings under a brisk and business-like air.

After dinner, Marshall called him into the house, and taking down the bag of money, gave it to him.

"I want you to ride over to Broad Horn, this afternoon, and deposit this for me."

That had been his usual course, when money came into his hands from the sale of cattle at

home; and he thought it not wise to deviate from it in the present instance.

He looked into the foreman's eyes as he gave him the money, as if he would read the very secrets of his heart. In spite of his iron nerve, Stevens flushed under the gaze. This might have been occasioned, though, by the very keenness of the questioning glance.

"When there, you will get a check from the agent who effected the sale of the last shipment, and deposit it with this. You can have the check drawn in your name."

He felt that it was a risky thing to do, if Stevens was the scoundrel he half feared him to be, for the deposits would represent a goodly sum. But he was determined the foreman should not know he suspected him of any dishonorable conduct.

Stevens took the money with as great an air of unconcern as he could assume; and after a short talk on various matters of business, left the house, and soon departed on his Mission to Broad Horn City.

CHAPTER X.

WHAT OSGOOD SAW.

"HAIN'T had any antelope beef sence the year one!"

Several of the cowboys of the Double-Bar Ranch were returning with a bunch of cattle which had strayed beyond the limits of the range. A band of antelopes had shown themselves on an adjacent ridge, their white flanks reflecting the sunlight in a most tempting way.

"Can't stand that there, nohow!" Kansas Jim declared, unslinging his rifle. "I'm a-goin' to hey one o' them goats!"

"You can't get within a mile of them at this time of year," one of the cowboys remonstrated. "Wait till winter, when the blizzards tame 'em down."

"I'm too play-goned hungry!" staring wishfully in the direction of the band. "I've flagged 'em many a time, an' mebbe I kin do it ag'in. You fellers go on, an' I'll try fer one, anyway."

No objection was offered, and he turned his horse toward the antelopes. When he advanced upon them, they disappeared over the rise, but he cantered briskly up the slope, hoping to get a shot at them in the valley beyond.

When he had vanished over the ridge, the cowboys continued on with the cattle, until a shot came back.

"I'll have to take a hand in that!" Osgood declared, reining in his horse.

He did not wait to see if any of his companions wished to accompany him, but galloped away in the direction of the shot, hoping none of them would follow.

He had his reasons for thus separating himself from his comrades. He had been watching Kansas Jim more closely than ever since the discovery of the hidden bag of gold, and now fancied that there might be something more than appeared on the surface in this sudden desire to go after the antelopes. There seemed little chance that any of them could be killed at this time of year, for it was midsummer, and they were very wild and wary. Occasionally one came among the cattle, and sometimes they could be brought within shooting-distance by flagging. But, as a rule, it required a fleet horse and hard riding to get near them.

Win Osgood had quickly taken these facts into consideration, and the probability was strong that there was a mystery that needed to be looked into.

When he had ridden a few hundred yards he glanced over his shoulder, and noted with delight that none of the cowboys were inclined to follow.

"Now, if I only can keep far enough to the rear to see what he does without him seeing me, perhaps I can discover something. I've no idea what he can want to do out here, though, if he really isn't going to hunt antelopes!"

There was a bluish haze in the air, with atmospheric refraction showing little lakes where none existed and drawing the few visible objects into fantastic and unrecognizable shapes.

Before reaching the top of the ridge, Osgood dismounted; and, leaving his horse, advanced quietly on foot. Should the action be seen by the cowboys, he knew it would be considered a very natural one, and occasioned by a desire to locate the game without exposing the hunter's position.

This was not the real reason for the movement. He wanted to see what Kansas Jim was doing, without making his presence known to the detective.

Looking over the rise, he saw Kansas Jim far away on the opposite slope, over which he

must soon disappear, and headed in the direction of the foot-hills. The antelopes, on the other hand, had sped down the valley, and were almost indistinguishable in the shimmering haze. Even Kansas Jim and his horse were drawn out of all true proportions, and seemed more like a tree or a tower, or other tall, stationary object than what they really were.

He fancied that the detective had stopped, and was gazing back over the grassy expanse to see if he was being pursued. Hence, Osgood did not arise from his recumbent position until the detective had disappeared over the further ridge. He then went back and got his horse and followed in hot haste, fearful lest the man he was dogging might vanish altogether.

The cowboys were almost out of sight with their bunch of cattle, and he felt that his actions would not be noticed by them, or if seen, that the true cause would not be dreamed of.

"There's something wrong here!" he muttered, when seated in the saddle and flying along after Kansas Jim. "There's a mystery back of this, and if I can, I'm going to probe it."

The strange happenings of the past few days filled his mind with thoughts that were perplexing and not pleasurable. Could it be that after all, Kansas Jim was not what he represented himself to be, but rather the double-faced villain described in Mason's letter?

"I'll know the truth, if I have to follow him all day!" Osgood pluckily exclaimed. "It is strange, too, the course he is taking! When he went over the ridge he was headed straight for the foot-hills. Now, what can an honest man, and one of Marshall's employees, want out there? And then, he lied; for he said he was going to hunt antelopes, and fired that shot to make us think that was what he was doing. I'll warrant he wasn't within a mile of them, when he did it. It was all a blind."

When the ridge was gained, he again advanced on foot until its crest was reached, taking every precaution to prevent discovery, should Kansas Jim be near. He felt sure, however, he was not near.

"It would be an awkward thing if he should see me," he soliloquized. "I doubt if I could concoct a yarn that would plausibly account for my presence here. A wish to join him in a hunt would hardly do."

He had mounted the ridge, and was now staring over the billowy expanse. Far away, he saw Kansas Jim again heading in the same direction. But that he knew it must be he, he might have thought that the wavy object that danced and flickered in the smoky and refracting air a wind-blown bush or even a rock, or anything other than what it was. But his eyes had long been accustomed to making out objects on the deceptive plains, and he was not at all fooled by the jerky capers of the mirage.

He again mounted and followed in chase, confident now that the detective would not suspect him, even should he chance to look backward. There were similar dancing objects on all sides, some stationary and some moving, some heaps of rocks, and some wandering cattle; and unless Kansas Jim was an old hand in discerning things in this bewildering region, he would not be able to distinguish his pursuers from these.

Apparently, the detective had no idea he was being trailed, for he continued straight on, disappearing finally, at a gap in the hills.

Osgood approached this point with great caution, concealing his horse in some bushes and carefully creeping up the opening.

Kansas Jim had gone on through the gorge, and the young cowboy followed as speedily as possible.

When near the further end of the passage, he drew up with a sharp jerk. He had caught a glimpse of the animal which Kansas Jim had ridden. It was grazing in the little glade into which the gorge opened, but its late rider was not visible.

Osgood beat a quick retreat; and, once more concealing his horse in the bushes, came forward again on foot.

He did not pass entirely through the gorge, but climbed a small eminence at one side from which he could look down into the glade without being observed.

His blackest suspicions seemed to be realized. The shabby man he had been following was seated on a rock not far from the mouth of the pass, talking with a stranger who was equally disreputable in appearance.

"If I was going to make guesses, I should say that was one of Big Head Mike's men," was the cowboy's reflection, as his eyes fell on the pair. "It can't be any other. This is near the point where the Raiders disappear, whenever we chase them, and so far as I know no one else

ever haunts this vicinity. There are no ranches here, and that fellow doesn't look like a hunter. He isn't a hunter!"

The indications were strong against the honesty of the man who had come to the Double-Bar Ranch representing himself as a detective.

"An honest man would not be holding a con-fab, that way, with one of the very men he claims to be hunting down!"

It did, indeed, seem that this must be so; and Osgood, as he looked and strained his ears to catch the low-spoken words, was irresistably driven to the conclusion that Kansas Jim was not the man he pretended to be.

"If he was straight, he wouldn't sneak out here this way," Osgood commented. "No; he wouldn't do anything without consulting Marshall and revealing to him his plans. Beyond question, he is a traitor!"

It hurt him immeasurably to think this of the man he had so fully trusted. But he could not disbelieve the evidence of his own eyes. He endeavored to form a hypothesis favorable to the innocence of the alleged detective, but turn the facts as he would, he could not drive from his mind the conclusion forced on him.

For more than a half-hour the two shabby-looking men conferred together. Then they separated, the stranger plunging into the hills, and Kansas Jim returning toward the ranch.

CHAPTER XI.

A BIT OF VILLAINY.

Two nights later there was another descent of the Raiders of the Range. They came as before, advancing straight up to the ranch-house and corrals. There were no cattle at that point to attract them on this occasion, but there were a number of ponies in the corral, and some grazing on the range not far away.

The first intimation the people of the Double-Bar had of their presence was given by the confused trampling of the ponies' feet; for the corral gate had been thrown wide open, and the animals within the inclosure freed.

Up to that time the movements of the Raiders had been of the stealthy, quiet kind. When the ponies dashed out of the corral, however, the outlaws rent the air with their bewildering cries, striking terror to the ponies, and causing them to stampede instantly—for many of them were unbroken and half-wild bronchos.

Of course the greatest confusion prevailed; for, when the yelling commenced, the cowboys of the Double-Bar were all asleep in the bunkhouse. Some of them ran out half-clothed, grasping their weapons as they ran, and opened fire on the daring Raiders. But the turmoil and excitement was so great, and the darkness so intense, that no injury was inflicted. The outlaws did not tarry to offer resistance, but swept with the ponies over the prairie like a whirlwind.

Luke Stevens and Kansas Jim, with Osgood, were the first to gain their heads and attempt to organize a pursuit. The leadership devolved on Stevens, and under his instructions the remaining ponies were got out of the stables, and saddled and bridled for the chase.

There were barely enough ponies in the stables to accommodate the cowboys, and these were not all of the best. Many of the speediest had been in the corral. For Kansas Jim there was no pony at all, and he was forced to take Boomerang, or remain behind.

"He's like a singed cat, a heap sight better'n he looks," the detective asserted. "In that way Boomerang is a good deal like his master. Deceivin' sarpants! Yes! He minds me o' an old sway-back I had onc't, what didn't look like as if he could run wu't shucks; but he was a runner from Raceville!"

No one paid any attention to the mumblings of Kansas Jim, though they were heard by nearly all. Time seemed too precious to waste on rambling reflections; for while these preparations were going forward, the Raiders were making double-quick speed with their booty for the sheltering hills.

The accoutering and mounting for the chase was quickly accomplished, however, and the pursuit was commenced, with Luke Stevens in the lead, mounted on a fine animal, and Kansas Jim trailing behind with Boomerang.

They had not gone five hundred yards, when they were brought to a standstill by an ear-piercing scream from the direction of the ranch-buildings, followed shortly by cries of alarm and a clatter of hoofs.

"Something's wrong!" said Stevens, wheeling his horse as if on a pivot. "That was Kitty's voice."

The others had thought the same, and recognized the excited shouts as Marshall's.

Up to that moment Osgood had connected Kansas Jim with the descent of the Raiders, believing that the detective had met the man in the hills two days before for the purpose of making arrangements for this very deed. It was a plausible theory, but it was given a rude shock by this new discovery.

It appeared plain, now, that the driving off of the ponies was a mere ruse meant to draw the cowboys away from the ranch-house so that the abduction of the girl might be the more readily accomplished. Surely this could not be the work of Kansas Jim. To all outward seeming he could have no object in perpetrating such a piece of scoundrelism.

As the detective was in the rear, when the backward race for the house was commenced, he was placed in front of the returning party; and he now got out of Boomerang a pace that one would have deemed impossible.

The mangy-looking beast thrust his nose into the wind, and with every muscle straining, bounded forward like a trained racer. This wonderful burst of speed passed almost unnoticed because of the gloom; but Luke Stevens became aware, when he attempted to forge to the front with his splendid animal, that to come up with and pass Boomerang required fully as much mettle as his horse possessed. He did succeed, but the ranch-house was almost at hand before he left the insignificant-looking pony behind.

Philip Marshall, who had not accompanied the cowboys, was found between the house and the corral, in an almost distracted frame of mind. His grief was heart-rending and piteous.

"Oh, my daughter!" he exclaimed. "Save her! Save her!"

No such injunctions were needed to send the cowboys clattering on the trail of the abductors. Kansas Jim alone, seeing that he would be nearly useless in the race, tarried a moment for a word of explanation, and to endeavor to comfort the grief-stricken man.

Marshall's excitement was so great he could scarcely detail how the outrage occurred; but Kansas Jim learned enough to know that she had been stealthily approached, while standing in the door listening to the sounds of the pursuit of the Raiders, and had there been clasped about the waist by a brawny man, while another threw a blanket over her head.

She had only had time to give that one scream, when she was picked up and thrown across the back of a horse, which was at that moment brought up by a confederate. Marshall had run to her assistance, but had been stricken down by one of the men; after which they rode away, and he began to call loudly for help.

Having learned this, Kansas Jim hurried on; and by pushing Boomerang, succeeded after a time in coming up with the hindmost cowboys.

The abductors of the girl separated while not a great way from the ranch-house, with the apparent intention of baffling pursuit. The cowboys were crowding them rather closely at the instant, and Luke Stevens was but a short distance behind.

Stevens was near enough, however, to determine which of the abductors continued on with the girl, and after this one he rushed, heedless of the fact that his comrades were falling far behind.

The horse he was pursuing was double-burdened, and there could be little doubt that the animal of the ranch-foreman would succeed in coming up with it, if the race continued for any great length of time.

The darkness of the night quickly bid pursuer and pursued from both friends and foes.

The chase was a long and hot one. More than a mile had been swept over, Stevens drawing steadily nearer to the abductor. No sound of the other Raiders or cowboys could be heard.

"Halt, or I'll fire on you!" Stevens shouted, drawing his revolver and swinging it threateningly.

The man paid no heed to the command, but continued to dig his heels into the flanks of the straining broncho and urged it on.

"Halt!" Stevens again called, crowding still closer.

The rascal did not obey; and Stevens, throwing up his revolver, fired at him.

This was apparently too much for the fellow's nerves, for he sprung from the horse, and abandoning it, dashed for safety into the darkness.

Kitty, who had been seated before him, and who was hysterically frightened by all that had occurred, clutched at the animal's mane to keep herself from falling, and nervously essayed to check its speed.

This she was unable to do, for it was badly

scared; but the foreman's magnificent steed speedily overhauled it.

Stevens had paid no heed to the escaping Raider, but bad ridden straight forward after the horse that carried the girl.

Kitty was almost in a fainting condition when he came up with her and grasped the bridle-rein to check the plunging pony. He sprung down and tenderly assisted her to the ground.

"You are not hurt?" he whispered, bending over her. "Tell me you are not hurt!"

A little shiver thrilled her form, but whether it was caused by what she had passed through, or by Stevens's distasteful presence, would have been difficult to determine. Perhaps she did not herself know. Of late, the foreman had been unbearable to her.

"I am not hurt," she avowed, sitting up and endeavoring to rise to her feet. "A little shaken, that is all. I'll be over it presently."

"Oh, I am glad to hear it," he alleged, crouching at her side. "I really feared for the worst."

She arose and attempted to withdraw from him.

"Have you no words of thanks for this?" in an injured tone.

"I do thank you, Mr. Stevens, ever so much!" shivering again in that uncertain, distrustful way.

The words emboldened the foreman. He gently assisted her to her horse.

"That declaration pleases me," he purred. "If you would but make another declaration for which I have long hoped and prayed, I should be the happiest man alive!

"Stay! Do not draw away from me in that manner. I have spoken to you on this subject before, and I must speak again. You are not unmindful of how I have loved you. How, since I first saw you, my whole heart has been yours. Will you not let my acts to-night plead for me? I do not claim to be an angel, but I think I am as good as the average man, and if you were my wife, would do all in my power to make you happy."

This was the opportunity that Luke Stevens had schemed and worked for. This it was that had taken him into the hills to confer with Big Head Mike. On that visit, the plan which had now been consummated, had been made. Big-Head Mike had not gone into the scheme willingly, but after much persuasion on the part of Stevens, had consented to undertake the part assigned to him and his men.

This was, to make a descent on the ranch-house, and run off a number of cattle and ponies to draw the men of the Double-Bar away from the buildings, that the abduction of Kitty might be easily performed. After which, she was to be rescued in truly heroic style by the enamored foreman, who would thus be given a splendid opportunity of pleading his cause in a manner he hoped would prove acceptable.

The plot had been carried out to perfection.

"Do not talk to me in that way," Kitty pleaded. "Your words distress me. Please help me into the saddle, and we will return to the house."

She was trembling violently.

"You must give me an answer!" Stevens insisted, obediently aiding her to mount. "I have been patient; but, my God, Kitty! patience ceases after awhile to be a virtue."

His words were tremulous and burning.

"I can not be your wife!" she declared, grasping the bridle-rein. "I have told you that before. Do not urge it on me."

"I can't help it!" he persisted. "You ask an impossible thing. I can't help loving you, any more than the flowers can help loving the sun, and it will kill me if I remain silent! Can't you give me some hope, Kitty? Just a word of hope?"

"I can not, and be honest with myself," and she turned the horse in the homeward direction.

The foreman ground his teeth in repressed rage; and it was fortunate for him that the darkness hid the fierce look that distorted his features. But he was forced to make a virtue of necessity and ride at her side toward the ranch-house, though throughout the journey he continued to pour into her unwilling ears his distasteful protestations of affection.

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNPLEASANT AFFAIR.

THIS virtual failure of his elaborate scheme did not rest lightly on Luke Stevens. He had almost succeeded in convincing himself that by thus heroically rescuing the girl, he would be pinnacled on high, in her estimation, and that

she would listen willingly to his declarations of love. The scheme had failed, and he felt humbled, baffled, chagrined. Not only that—he was intensely angered.

He determined he would see her again. Perhaps her thoughts toward him would change, after a night spent in contemplating what he had done for her—what risks he had taken in her behalf; for he believed she would never see through his duplicity or understand that the abduction was only part of a gigantic plot to throw her into his power.

He did not credit her with as much native shrewdness as she possessed. Until he knew before her on the grass of the plains, with no witnesses but the night-wind and the stars, and there offered her his heart and hand, grasping feverishly at the opportunity thus presented, she had really not suspected him. But the urgency of his manner, his very attitude, and the words he addressed to her awoke within her breast the old slumbering distrust.

He had acted as if she owed him her love for this rescue; and she could not doubt that he felt so. His persistence, too, after she had urged him to desist! All these things struck her unfavorably—and instead of being more kindly inclined toward him with the dawning of the new day, she was the more bitter and resentful. The haunting thought that he may have made this opportunity clung to her.

Stevens had resolved to speak to her again on the subject uppermost in his mind, and lingered about the stables and corrals until nearly all the cowboys had departed in pursuance of their various duties. He was angered to note that Win Osgood still remained; but as Marshall had set Win a task, the foreman had no authority to order him out on the range.

Kitty was not aware of Stevens's presence in the bunk-house when she entered it that morning, or she would have delayed her visit. Some of the work there devolved on her daily, and this she went to perform.

She started violently, when she saw that Stevens was in the room. But it was too late to retreat without casting a direct affront on the man, and this she had no wish to do.

The foreman obsequiously hustled forward, and inquired if he could help her in any way. She declined the proffered aid, and taking up a dust-brush, plied it vigorously.

In spite of her evident perturbation, Stevens approached her, and in a most humble way broached the subject of the night before.

Kitty flushed painfully; and not wishing to hurt his feelings, replied as courteously, yet as firmly as possible.

The foreman returned to the attack, as if determined to force a favorable answer.

"Leave me, Mr. Stevens!" she pleaded. "If you do not cease annoying me, I shall be compelled to report the matter to my father."

Stevens seemed not to be deterred by this, and was again on the point of pressing his claims, when she hastily quitted the bunk-room and retreated to the shelter of the house.

The baffled and humiliated foreman glared after her with a look that seemed to indicate anything but the love he professed. His glance showed that he almost hated her for thus refusing him, and that if force were possible, and could accomplish his ends, he would not hesitate to use it.

As he turned, he saw Win Osgood standing in the opposite door of the bunk-house, staring at him with manifest surprise. There was no love lost between Stevens and Osgood. They held for each other a deep-seated and instinctive hatred, a feeling which had lately been much increased.

"You were spying on me, eh?" the foreman exclaimed, casting at him a look of withering contempt.

"I was doing nothing of the kind!" Osgood protested.

"How did you come to be there, then?"

"I came in here for a bit of rope."

A discourteous sneer of disbelief curled Stevens's lips.

"You are always looking for something or other, that you may be able to spy on me! I suppose you heard my words, too?"

"I heard nothing. I just came in as Miss Marshall was going out. You haven't been quarreling with her, I hope?"

"Quarreling? No!"

"From your manner, I thought you had."

The foreman bridled with wrath.

"Now look here, Win Osgood! I won't stand any of your nonsense. I'm not going to be spied on, and then insulted!"

The foreman was losing his discretion in the fury of his sudden rage.

"I wasn't spying!" Osgood firmly returned. "Why should I spy on you?"

"That's a lie!" Stevens hissed, clinching his fists. "You've been spying on me for two or three weeks. Maybe you think I'm a fool; but I've noticed you, and have seen you hanging around more than once, watching me."

His anger was increasing, and he seemed determined to force a quarrel.

Win essayed to maintain his coolness, wondering the while if the foreman had really become aware that he was suspected and watched.

Stevens apparently read his thoughts in his honest, open face.

"You're a treacherous sneak!" he asserted. "You've fallen in love with Kitty Marshall, and are so afraid I'll speak a word to her that you won't get to hear, that you make an unmitigated ass of yourself!"

Osgood felt the thrust, as his flushed countenance showed.

"Have a care!" he warned, endeavoring to control his rising temper.

"You're a liar and a sneak, and I'll repeat it a dozen times if necessary!" advancing straight up to him and shaking his fist menacingly.

He was not prepared for what followed, though he ought to have expected it. Osgood's fist shot out. There was a resounding blow, as it landed on the exposed face of the speaker; and Stevens was knocked sprawling on the floor.

The young man's pent-up anger had burst bounds, his face seemed on fire, and his form trembled.

"Say that to me again, Luke Stevens, and I'll pound your head to a jelly!"

Stevens was wild with rage at this unexpected assault; and, springing to his feet, came at his adversary with the recklessness of a bull-dog.

So wild was he, and so governed by mad impulses, that he struck out in an aimless, heedless way that quickly exhausted his strength and did no injury to his opponent.

Osgood, on the other hand, contented himself with retreating slowly and warding off the blows, having no apparent desire to inflict injury.

While this was in progress, Kitty Marshall again appeared in the doorway. The loud words and blows had reached her at the house, and impelled her to ascertain the cause.

She seemed paralyzed with astonishment.

The combatants both noticed her, at almost the same moment, and a cessation of hostilities resulted. Each was mortified beyond measure. It placed them before her in a very unenviable light.

"What's the cause of this?" she demanded, turning white and red by turns. "I never dreamed that either of you could be guilty of engaging in a common fight."

Her words held the very essence of scorn.

Win Osgood hung his head in abasement.

"It was not of my seeking," Stevens assured. "When you went out of here, a little while ago, I discovered that he had been spying on us and listening to what we said; and when I charged him with it he struck me to the floor."

"It is false!" Win hoarsely exclaimed. "I was not spying, and he was the first to begin the quarrel."

Stevens retorted hotly, and it appeared they would again attack each other.

"Enough of this!" she commanded. "I will not hear another word in explanation; and if you have any respect for yourselves, you will separate, and try to forget you were ever guilty of this thing."

Win attempted to exculpate himself.

"I will hear nothing!" she declared. "If you do not instantly separate and leave this house, I will call father!"

She tarried a moment in the doorway to see that they intended to obey, and then turned haughtily toward the house.

Osgood left the room by the rear door, at almost the same moment. He was humiliated beyond degree. Not for worlds would he have had her discover him thus engaged. He knew that it had lowered him in her estimation; and the thoughts that now stirred within his breast were almost suffocating.

Not so with Luke Stevens. He was somewhat mortified, it is true, but his mortification was tempered by a feeling of jubilance. Osgood had been degraded, and he felt that that was victory enough for one day.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LITTLE OLD MAN WITH THE GLASS.

A QUEER-LOOKING old man was crouched on one of the highest peaks of the foot-hills to the

westward of the Double-Bar Ranch. His oddity was perhaps the most peculiar thing about him. He was not so old as he appeared at first glance, though his face was wrinkled and seamed, and premature toothlessness had caused his lips to sink inward until his mouth seemed a pit, above and below which his chin and nose came almost together, like guarding sentinels.

His attire was tattered and torn and storm-beaten, and not improved in appearance by liberal smearings of grease. His head was bare, the battered hat resting on the rocks beside him, and his unshorn locks were gently swayed, now and then, by the wind.

He was intently looking into the valley below him, muttering occasional comments on what he saw.

A scraggy tree stood just in front of him, and its low-hanging branches screened him.

He lifted a large field-glass from the rock, applied it to his eyes, and gazed through it long and intently. The glass revealed the bottom of the valley with great distinctness; and what he saw is worthy of brief description.

In the valley, protected and partially hidden by a growth of trees, were a number of stout log cabins. A casual observer would never have seen them. It had cost the watcher on the hill-top many long days of close searching to find where these cabins were located—for this was the home of the outlaw band known as the Raiders of the Range.

Some thin and almost invisible columns of smoke were curling up from the chimneys of the cabins; and, as it was now well on toward evening, it seemed very probable the Raiders were engaged in preparation for supper.

"It makes me hungry to look at it," and the queer individual put down the glass and mournfully rubbed his hollow stomach. "Suthin' warm wouldn't go bad now. I low, though, I'll have to tackle hard tack and meat. Twouldn't do to build a fire up hyer."

His evident interest did not allow him to long contemplate the cravings of hunger, and he again lifted the glass and looked down in the valley.

There were some horses picketed in the grove, contentedly munching hay.

He raised the glass and swept the further hills, gazing through some gorges that opened from this valley into others of a similar character.

A smile of pleasure came to the wrinkled lips.

"They hain't driv' any uv 'em off yet!" gazing at some cattle which the glass revealed in one of the valleys. "I wuz afraid they would. I hope they'll leave 'em there tell roundin'-up time."

Thoughts of this "rounding-up time" seemed to give him great satisfaction, for he put down the glass and indulged in a series of quiet chuckles.

"We'll corral 'em by and by," he asserted, once more peering through the glass. "Yes; we'll corral 'em by and by!"

He again fixed the instrument on the group of cabins in the valley, and to the occupants of these his words apparently referred.

"They'd be stirrin' round a good deal livelier than they be, if they only know'd I wuz up hyer!" he commented. "They wouldn't be a-lovin' uv me, I vow! No; no more'n a nest o' bald-hornets 'd be a-lovin' uv a red-headed boy that wuz a-preparin' to stir'em up with a stick."

A slight crackling of underbrush caused him to start and wheel quickly about, and at the same time lower the glass. His mouth expanded in a grin, however, when he saw who the new-comer was.

"Didn't know whether 'twas you er a b'ar, ye made so much noise!" he expostulated.

The new-comer was none other than Kansas Jim, the Cross-cut Detective.

A smile came to his face, also, as he saw the forlorn specimen of humanity perched on the rock, and caught these words of welcome:

"Mountains of Moab! You look like a lightnin'-rod a settin' there. Better cut off a foot er two o' yer perpendic'lar, er you'll be seen."

The little man evidently understood this as a joke, for he burst into a guffaw of laughter.

"Take a squint through this hyer glass, an' then you'll be ready to say that I lied, in not tellin' you the whole truth. It's better'n I represented. They're all there, cattles, bronchos, an' everything."

"But you want to be keerful, Kennedy; pesky keerful! I paid fifty dollars fer that glass, an' I wouldn't have it broke fer anything; an' if you look too hard, them eyes o' yours'll bu'st it into splinters!"

Kansas Jim gave his eyes a twist that seemed to make them more crossed than ever.

"If I hold my hand on one, Ebenezer, I reckon it'll be safe. I'd feel better, though, if you told me that the thing was insured ag'in' sich disasters. Now, some might consider these hyer eyes an affliction; but they've brought me more fun than would a mint o' money."

"An' kep' you from marryin'," the little man interrupted.

"They hev, fer a fac', pardner. I fell in love with the schoolmarm, that led me daily to the fountain of knowledge in the tender years o' my youth, an' asked her, p'intedly, if she didn't want to hitch up with me. An' if you'll believe it, Ebenezer, the high-spirited thing broke the ruler over my back!

"Then, there was the gal in the circus, what wore spangles an' tights, an' rid three hosses to onc't a good deal easier'n I could ride one. I thought inasmuch as I was a-doin' the sacred ox act, that she'd look on me kindly. But law! she said I was only a canvasman, an' didn't belong to the perfesh, an' that anyway, my eyes were so crooked that they give her the headache, ever' time I looked at her."

Ebenezer Hall, for such was the name of the little old man, fairly rolled on the ground in the excess of his delight, as these mental pictures were brought before him.

"But you're a-fergittin' what you come fer," he chided.

"Great curiosity! Yes!" snatching up the glass. "When I git to wanderin' on about the past, I lose what little mite of sense is left me. How many d'y'e calc'late there is of 'em down there, Ebenezer?"

"I've tried to count 'em, two er three times; but like the old nigger that tried to count the pigs, I jist couldn't. They frisked around too much; an' what with comin' an' goin', an' meanderin' this way an' that, an' steppin' into the houses an' out uv em ag'in, I couldn't tell whether there was ten men er fifty."

"Not over a dozen of 'em, all told, I've figgred," was Kansas Jim's statement, as he peered down the little valley. "A good many things hev gone to show, that they ain't more than that many."

In this, however, Kansas Jim was mistaken.

"Twill make it all the easier, then," said Ebenezer.

"Hopes o' my youth! Yes! An' the easier 'tis, the better it will please me. I've sot under the willers o' Babylon, long enough. Things hev been goin' ag'in' me, mighty, lately, an' the cheerfulness o' an' agreeable change would make me more chipper. If I don't take down my harp party quick an' strike a chord o' joy, the strings'll be rusted tell they can't vibrate."

"The opportunity's a-humpin' right along!" Ebenezer declared, with a wise bob of the head.

It was plain that these two were old and familiar friends; and, not to be too mysterious about it, it may be said that Ebenezer Hall was the man whom Kansas Jim had met when he pretended to go on that antelope hunt.

Hall was a confederate of the Cross-cut Detective, and the two were working together for the overthrow of the Range Raiders.

"Yes, yes: so it is!" assenting to Hall's last comment, "an' the sooner it gits hyer, the quicker. It can't come too soon fer me!"

He set down the glass, and leaning easily against a protuberance of the rock, began an earnest discussion of the situation. He had been in constant communication with Ebenezer Hall; and Hall had sent for him that he might survey the location of the outlaws, and thus be better able to determine the proper course to be pursued, now that their retreat had been discovered.

For an hour, they talked with great earnestness, weighing every circumstance with the utmost care; and then Kansas Jim took his departure.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLEVERLY DONE.

EBENEZER HALL closed his field-glass and deposited it in a case which was strapped to his shoulders; and then climbed gingerly down from the rock, and seemed about to depart, as Kansas Jim had done.

He was arrested by the report of a rifle and a succession of shouts.

He had barely time to fish out a rusty revolver and get it in readiness, when he beheld Kansas Jim racing back toward him.

"Slide, pardner, slide!" the latter panted, as he drew near. "The enemy's on us! Fightin' Philistines! Yes!"

He jerked a thumb in the direction from whence came the sounds. Hall had no need to be told that the detective was being pursued.

Their situation was a precarious one, and

only prompt action could save them from capture.

One of the outlaws had seen Kansas Jim as he was making his way on foot to meet Hall, and had notified the band of the fact. The reason the queer pair on the top of the peak had not discovered the advance on them, was because the advance had been made after they had ceased to survey the cabins through the spy-glass and had settled down to a discussion of measures and plans for the overthrow of the outlaws.

The approach of the Raiders had been carefully conducted, every shelter of rock, grove and gorge having been taken advantage of.

A considerable time had been consumed in the ascent of the slope, and they only arrived near the summit, as the cross-eyed detective was making his way from the place. They had seen him, fired upon him, and were now coming in hot pursuit, many of them being mounted.

The precipitous and rocky character of the slopes, however, gave the horsemen but little advantage over those on foot.

Hall understood the danger fully as well as did Kansas Jim; and, when the latter arrived, panting at his side, the little old man turned and fled with him from their exposed position toward the shelter of the rocky draws beyond.

They were seen as they crossed the narrow divide, drawing the fire of their pursuers, but they sped on unharmed.

It seemed for a time that they would be able to make their escape without much difficulty, for the lay of the land was favorable to them; but as they turned a jutting wall of granite, they found themselves face to face with some of the outlaws who had passed around that way in the hope of thus cutting them off.

"Git down an' hump yerself, pardner!" Kansas Jim exhorted. "We'll bev to split company hyer. Runners o' Rome! Yes!"

He did not stop to see if Hall was inclined to obey his instructions, but darted to one side, and sheltering himself as well as he could among the boulders, ran at the top of his speed to a point of greater security.

Hall saw the wisdom of Kansas Jim's words. By separating and dividing this small force of outlaws, their chances of escape would be much improved. Accordingly, he ran in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately for his hopes, he soon found himself hemmed in by rocky, impassable walls; and worse than all, perceived that other outlaws were advancing upon him through the gorge into which he had plunged. He sought to scale one of the barriers that hedged him in, hoping to reach higher ground and there be able to baffle his enemies. He could go neither forward nor backward; and when he attempted to climb up the wall, he found to his great distress, that the task was far beyond his strength. In his younger and more agile days, he might have accomplished it.

He ceased in his efforts, as a warning voice below him sung out a threatening command to halt; and in obedience to this command, and the cocked and pointed rifle, he climbed slowly down from the eminence he had gained, and surrendered with what grace he could.

Kansas Jim, from the top of a distant ridge, was able to look down into this gorge and see what had taken place. There were only three of Hall's captors; and the Cross-cut Detective was strongly tempted to return and endeavor to rescue his friend out of their hands. But he was himself closely pursued, and the effort might not only result in failure, but subject him to the same fate.

With a heavy sigh, he therefore toiled on up the slope, hearing the cries of the Raiders, as they hastened after him.

He had ridden into the foot-hills, and he was now trying to reach his horse, which was picketed in a little grove on the opposite side of the slope. He believed that if once safely mounted, he would be able to baffle and outwit the outlaws.

Only two or three of the latter were following him on foot across the flinty ridges, those who were mounted having taking an easier route, with the intention of circling the hill and cutting him off from a descent into the opposite valley.

The Cross-cut Detective understood the nature of this maneuver, and to keep them from accomplishing their purpose, ran at his highest speed.

One of the chasers essayed to stop him with a bullet, as he dashed across the divide, but the distance was entirely too great for successful shooting.

Panting and perspiring, Kansas Jim rushed

heedlessly down the incline, bounding and sliding and leaping like a goat from projection to projection, at the imminent risk of his neck.

The little grove in the hollow was now but a few hundred yards away; and although the mounted outlaws were already coming around a curve of the hill below him, he succeeded in reaching the grove before them.

It was but the work of an instant to cast loose the halter and mount to the saddle; but when he rode from the shelter of the trees he discovered that the Raiders were dangerously near.

He also made a further discovery that did not tend to reassure him. In some manner one of the outlaws had gained a position in the valley near the line of the detective's intended flight. To pass this man would bring the peril of a shot at short range.

Kansas Jim was therefore forced to turn his animal in the direction of the gorge-cut country to the northward.

This he did, and plied the spurs right willingly. The outlaws, noting the line of his new flight, came on with yells and cries, at intervals firing their rifles and revolvers, hoping that a lucky shot might disable the detective's horse and place their enemy in their power.

They knew they must overtake him soon, or he would slip through their fingers entirely, for another hour would bring the darkness of night.

Kansas Jim was not unaware of this most important fact; and bent every thought and energy to the task of baffling them and eluding them until the coming darkness should give him its kindly shelter.

He was not long in discovering, however, that the animal he was riding was no match for the horses of the outlaws. It was one of the cow-ponies of the ranch, and he had not selected it with a view to any great burst of speed, not dreaming he would be discovered and chased.

A dead run of less than a half-hour brought him to the gorges whose openings he had seen from the grove.

Into one of these he entered; and when he saw that its further end and sides were clothed with trees and bushes, a most hopeful plan presented itself.

He looked back to see how near the outlaws were; and gave his horse an extra cut with the halter rope to urge it into renewed speed. A dash of ten minutes carried him to the upper end of the gorge. From this point another gorge opened, which was also filled with bushes, and appeared to lead toward the plains.

He had no desire to enter the plains, for he knew he would there be quickly overhauled and captured or killed.

As soon as he was hidden from view of the yelling outlaws by the screen of trees, he nimbly slipped from the saddle, and giving the animal a sharp cut with a stick, sent it skurrying into the new passage.

Then he ran a few feet into the bushes and hastily secreted himself, drawing his revolver and cocking it for use in case he should be seen and attacked.

He was not given many minutes in which to crouch there before the outlaws dashed up, laboring their animals cruelly and loading the air with their bitter maledictions.

They did not stop for a moment, but pushed right on after the riderless horse, the sounds of whose clattering hoofs came plainly back to them.

As soon as they were out of sight, the detective drew a breath of relief and then burrowed deeper among the screening trees.

The gloom was thickening already in that shady retreat, and a few minutes more would so increase it as to render him almost safe.

He hoped the horse would continue on to the open country before the outlaws should discover that he was riderless; and this hope was destined to be gratified, for when even the hills had become shrouded in darkness, they had not yet returned.

Feeling that there would be little difficulty now in baffling pursuit, even should the Raiders come back that way, he left his place of concealment and advanced quietly up the gorge in the direction from which he had fled.

CHAPTER XV

A DESPERATE LEAP.

KANSAS JIM had no notion of abandoning his friend to the mercy of the outlaws. It seemed the likeliest thing in the world that Ebenezer Hall would, on being captured, be taken directly to the home of the Raiders, and there held for safe-keeping. The detective while crouching in the concealment of the bushes had carefully con-

sidered this, and weighed the chances for and against his rescue.

It did not seem probable that Big Head Mike's men had slain Hall when they got him into their clutches, though worse things might even be expected of them. The detective, however, was inclined to hopefulness; and his mind was given to the plans he had formed, as he toilfully climbed the slopes and made his way in the direction of the valley.

He counted much on the fact that most of the Raiders were absent from the retreat.

He succeeded in entering the valley without much difficulty, but he found that a sentinel was posted in the edge of the grove.

He deviated from the direct line; and, passing the sentinel, approached the houses. All were deserted, save one. In this a light was burning, and its rays guided the detective's footsteps.

He drew near it from the rear, where a small, square window looked out upon the grove. The light of the lamp came through this window, and he knew by experience that he could safely look in, if he was careful to keep out of the rays of the lamp and so escape the vision of the sentinel.

As he looked cautiously in, he gave a start of surprise. He had expected to find Hall in this cabin, but there was another there whom he had not expected to see. This other was Luke Stevens, who had arrived at the retreat since the coming of darkness.

Only one man, the sentinel now posted at the edge of the grove, had been left in charge of Hall, while all the other outlaws had gone in pursuit of the Cross-cut Detective.

"Shades of Judas Iscariot!" Kansas Jim muttered, as he involuntarily drew back. "I never thought to see that imp o' darkness hyer. Not at this identical moment, anyhow. Not by a jugful—no!"

He again approached the window. Stevens was sitting easily in a chair, talking to Ebenezer, who was seated in another chair, but whose hands and feet were bound.

"What's ever yer hands finds to do, do it at onc't," the detective commented, as he again drew back into the security of the shadows. "If I git that side pardner o' mine out o' there, I'll bev to move these pegs an' do it 'fore the rest o' the snakes comes a-wigglin' back. Great sar-pents o' Eden! Yes!"

He carefully made the circuit of the cabins to be sure that the sentinel was the only one of the Raiders there. Having thoroughly satisfied himself as to this, he returned to the house from which the lamp was shining, advancing this time toward the front door. He felt pretty safe in his conclusion that this door was not locked; for, as Hall was bound, there would be no necessity of barring and bolting the door.

He peered through the keyhole, and seeing the two sitting in the same relative positions and still talking, he quickly turned the knob and bounded in to the cabin with drawn revolver.

The surprise was complete. The foreman had had no thought of danger, feeling safe under the protection of the sentinel; and before he could rise or cry out, he found himself looking into the deadly tube of the detective's weapon.

"Take it cool, pardner!" Kansas Jim drawled, noting with satisfaction the look of cringing fear depicted in Stevens's countenance. "Take it cool, an' ye'll live longer."

Hall was quite as much astonished at this sudden turn of events as was the ranch foreman, but his astonishment was necessarily of a different character.

"If ye don't squirm er attempt to git out yer shootin'-irons, I won't feel under any obligations to plug ye," Kansas Jim continued. "If you do, though, I'll not be responsible for the consequences. You had something to say about consequences, onc't, pardner, if you'll take the trouble to rec'lect; an' it's my turn, now. Evil consequences is allus the direct result of evil actions, as you'll find out before you're much older."

"Now, I'm goin' to untie Ebenezer, an' if ye so much as bat yer eyes, I'll shoot 'em out. Cross-eyes is bad, pardner, but ye've got sense enough to know they're better'n no eyes at all. Shades o' darkness! Yes! So keep steady while I'm a-doin' the rope act."

He did not lower the threatening weapon; but drew out a knife, and going up to Hall, severed with one stroke the cords that held his wrists.

"Now take the sticker an' cut the strings off'n yer feet," he commanded, "while I keep this critter froze to his cheer!"

Hall obeyed with great cheerfulness.

"Now take them same strings an' tie our friend hyer up so tight he can't wink. An' if

there ain't string enough, I see some rope over yander in the corner. I'll watch 'im, an' if he opens his mouth to give a yawp, I'll put a bullet into it!"

Stevens was white with terror, and offered no resistance whatever when the little man approached and began to bind him.

Then, under instructions from Kansas Jim, the foreman's weapons were removed from his person and a gag was inserted in his mouth. When all this had been done satisfactorily, the two slipped quietly from the cabin and out into the darkness of the night, taking with them the frightened foreman of the Double-Bar.

They succeeded in escaping from the grove without the sentinel becoming aware that anything had gone wrong; and when they had accomplished this, they pushed with all rapidity toward the hills.

The foreman was cowed into complete submission, and advanced between the two without thought of resistance. Perhaps he was wise in this, for, with the exception of his feet, he was securely bound, and the Cross-cut Detective was in no temper for fooling. In addition, Ebenezer Hall had tied a length of rope about Stevens's waist, and now held the end of it in his hands.

"G'lang there!" he exclaimed, as they approached the hills, giving the rope a yank as he uttered the words. "My gentle v'lent, it's my turn now. You wuz a-crownin' powerful big, back yander in the cabin, but you crowed jist a mite too soon!"

Stevens had no words to offer in reply, and if he had had, the gag would have prevented him from speaking them. This torturing article was removed, however, when they were far enough in the hills to render that action safe.

Here the detective and his friend conferred for a short time, coming to the decision that it would be best to convey their prisoner direct to Broad Horn City, and there turn him over to the authorities.

This was a thing that Luke Stevens was desperately resolved they should not do. He feared the minions of the law as he probably feared nothing else, and from that moment forward he narrowly watched for some opportunity to escape.

The detective hurried on with him at as rapid a pace as possible, anxious to get far beyond the region of the hills before the coming of daylight. They swung in toward the southward, as it seemed less probable the outlaws would return from that direction.

The chance for which the foreman was seeking came, as they endeavored to cross a deep and swift river that cut its way through the hills. The detectives were compelled to make a long search before they could discover any means of crossing. Finally they found a tree that a tornado had uprooted and hurled across the stream. Its trunk made a fair bridge; and over it they essayed to pass, Kansas Jim going in front, with the prisoner in the middle, and Ebenezer following behind, holding on to the rope.

When the center of the stream had been gained, Luke Stevens sprung from the tree-trunk, and descended like a shot into the black depths, the rope held by Ebenezer being given such a violent jerk that the old man barely saved himself from falling.

The detectives were aghast with surprise and consternation. They had not anticipated so daring and desperate a movement, and as they stared downward, they could scarcely convince themselves they were not dreaming.

Except for the splash that came back when Stevens's body struck the water, they could not tell the length of the leap. Stevens had certainly not known anything of the distance from the log to the stream, and the risk he ran was fearful. The chances were that there were rocks in the channel, and he might have dashed himself to pieces on one of them; or, if the current were shallow, might have met a violent death against the granite bottom.

No sound save the first splash came back to give them information of the fate of their late captive.

"I vow he's dead as a herrin'!" Ebenezer ejaculated. "That's the biggest piece o' high divin' I ever see."

"Shades of Sam Patch! Yes! I should say it was!" Kansas Jim gasped. "'Twas wuss than when the sacred ox bucked me off the bridge into the river. Yes; a heap sight wuss! D'y'e reckon he's reely dead, Ebenezer?"

Ebenezer was tip-toeing back to the side of the stream from which they had advanced.

"You go t'other way," he whispered. "If he ain't dead, he'll come out some'eres below; an' like enough, we kin nab him ag'in."

Kansas Jim crossed the tree-trunk to obey; and with great difficulty they descended the rocks to the water's edge, and continued on down the stream, in the hope of finding Stevens. But they were doomed to disappointment, and finally gave up the useless search.

CHAPTER XVI.

BACK WITH THE RAIDERS.

STEVENS was not dead, however, neither was he injured by his desperate leap, though the icy water of the torrent seemed to congeal the very blood in his veins, and drive all the fire and energy out of his body. There were no rocks at that point, and the stream was, fortunately, deep, so that he sustained no bruises against the granite bottom.

He was a good swimmer, and even though his hands were tied, he yet managed to sustain himself, after he arose to the surface, and by the aid of the current successfully made his way some distance down the river.

Here he effected a landing, and crawled up on the rocks, thoroughly chilled and exhausted. But the thought that he was free comforted him in this extremity, and even seemed to add some warmth to his shivering form.

He heard the voices of the detectives as they searched for him, and conversed in subdued tones across the narrow stream. But they did not come near his hiding-place, and he was consequently not forced to beat a retreat.

He tried to remove the bonds from his wrists, but the wetting the cords had received had so tightened them that he failed utterly. When the voices came no more, and he knew that the detectives had abandoned the hunt, he got up from his recumbent attitude and painfully climbed the slopes to the higher ground above.

He was in no amiable frame of mind, though of course he felt elated at his escape. He was vengeful and ill-tempered; and, as he toiled painfully onward, he tried to outline some plan by which he could get even with these men. The rope was still about his waist and trailing behind him; and, as it caught occasionally, he seemed to bear Hall's taunting words, and feel the hateful yanks which that individual had delighted in giving.

"I'll be even with them, yet!" he muttered. "I'll kill that Kansas Jim, if I'm permitted to live a week longer! And the other one, I'd like to torture him to death by inches!"

He toiled on, slipping and sliding and growing constantly more irreful. The cords about his wrists had been so tightened by their soaking that they were very painful, and this did not add to his good humor.

It required more than an hour for him to regain the familiar territory surrounding the home of the Raiders.

He had descended into a gorge leading toward the valley, when he caught the sound of hoof-beats, and drawing back into the shadow of the wall waited for the approach of the horsemen.

He was reasonably sure that they were members of Big Head Mike's band, but he did not care to reveal himself until this was made a certainty.

He recognized the voices of the riders as they drew nearer; and knowing now that they were friends, left the wall and boldly called out to them.

They were the men who had chased Kansas Jim and been led on by the riderless horse far into the plains.

Their anger broke all bounds when they were told how the detective had returned and rescued the prisoner from the cabins, and of what had since occurred.

The long, fatiguing walk had served to drive the chill out of the foreman's veins, and in a measure to dry his clothing. He was given one of the horses of the new-comers, and placing himself at the head of the band led the already tired men in the direction of the river.

He hoped to come up with the detectives before they gained the open country, mentally vowed that if he did he would make them pay dearly for the indignities they had inflicted on him.

But though they searched the hills throughout the night, and descended into the plains, they could find no traces of the men they sought.

Before the plains country was reached, however, Stevens separated himself from them; and, mounted on his own fast horse, sped away in the direction of the Double-Bar Ranch.

CHAPTER XVII.

HANDICAPPED.

WHEN Kansas Jim reached the Double-Bar Ranch, about the middle of the forenoon of the next day, he found Stevens there in advance of

him. He was naturally filled with quiet surprise and wonderment, and speculated at some length on the probable manner in which Stevens had escaped death in the river, and then been able to reach the ranch in so short a time. He was careful, however, not to manifest his surprise.

Stevens avoided him, moving to another part of the grounds whenever the Cross-cut Detective came near.

"See hver, pardner," Kansas Jim said, addressing Osgood at the first opportunity, "if you'll tell me jist when that critter got back, I'll be much oblieged to you. I will, p'intedly!"

"Luke Stevens? He came in this morning about daylight, I think. He went to Broad Horn, yesterday evening."

"He did, eh? Thank ye fer the information. I thought he'd been somewhr's else. Torrents o' the mountains! Yes; I did so! He didn't hang out any clothes to dry, now, did he?"

Osgood stared, not comprehending the scope of the question. Kansas Jim did not choose to enlighten him at that moment; and moved away shortly, bending his steps toward the ranch-house.

This he entered; and requested of Kitty, who met him at the door, that he be permitted an interview with her father. Philip Marshall came forward, and the two were soon closeted together.

"Cunnel, I've got a few partic'lar words that I'd like to say to you, if so be they're convenient."

Marshall indicated a willingness to hear what he had to say.

"I got onto some of the doin's o' that p'ison rattler out there, last night," indicating Stevens, who could be seen through the window. "You know I've been tryin' to run down these Raiders, an' that that job's what I came hyer ter. I didn't come because I liked the cattle business. Horned steers o' Texas! No; not by a long shot!"

"I went out into the hills yesterday evenin' to see a friend o' mine, who's been helpin' me at that end of the line. He's located the thieves, an' we done some figgerin' together as to how we could corral 'em. They're in the purtiest little grove, cunnel. Quakin' aspens, yes! It's a beauty! An' twon't be no trouble at all to rake 'em in there."

Then, in his characteristic way, he proceeded to review in detail all the occurrences of the night.

Philip Marshall listened attentively, commenting now and then, as the story progressed.

Marshall was guarded, however, in expressing his real views, a thing that the Cross-cut Detective did not fail to note.

"Now to come to the p'int, cunnel: If the feller hadn't done that high divin', an' got away from us, he'd hav been in the jail at Broad Horn, this blessed mornin'. Prisons o' Venice! Yes! He would, p'intedly! An' there's whur he ought to be, an' whur he ought to stay. Now, I'm an officer o' the law, duly qualified, and so forth; an' if you'll give me three er four men, I'll put the fellow under arrest, take him to the railway, an' land him in prison. Kin I behv the men, cunnel?"

For reply, Marshall got up and walked to his desk and took therefrom a letter, which he placed in the detective's hands. It was the warning communication from Mason.

Kansas Jim's eyes blazed, as he glanced down the written page.

"I ain't too blamed cross-eyed, cunnel, to read that. Blind Bartimeus! No! It's plain as the sun. An' I think I understand it too. I low, now, this Mason is as square as a block?"

"His word is as good as his oath," Marshall returned. "I have known him for years, and have never had any reason to doubt his good-will and friendship."

"I s'pose not, cunnel; but the best men are liable to be deceived. Ananias and Sapphira! Yes! they air so! An' this feller's been deceived the wu'st kind. These is lies, cunnel. Bald-headed, brazen-faced lies."

"I don't know, though, as I kin blame you fer believin' 'em, cunnel. Likely I'd believe 'em myself, under the circumstances. We never know what we'll do, tell the time comes, as the man said when he run from the b'ar inter a hornets' nest."

"I haven't stated that I believe these things," Marshall corrected.

"No; you hevn't, cunnel; that's a fac'. But actions bray louder than dinner-horns. Yes; a heap louder. I s'pose you won't gimme the men, now?"

"I don't see how I can, till things are made a little clearer. I don't wish to accuse you of deception, and shall withhold all judgment until I get more light. There's something wrong. Stevens professes the best of intentions, and so do you. Time will prove the true from the false."

There was no anger in his words, only an indication of bewilderment and pain.

"I'm willin' to risk the revelation of time, cunnel," rising to depart. "All I ask is, that you'll lay low about this matter until it's proved to you who is lyin', and who ain't; an' I don't think the proof will be long a-comin', either. Twisted mysteries! No!"

With this final exclamation, he took his hat and departed, deeply troubled by the suspicion that had fallen upon him, and feeling how sorely handicapped he was thereby.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A VICTIOUS ATTACK.

NEAR the corner of the horse-corral, that afternoon, Win Osgood stumbled on a bit of paper, which, fluttering in the wind, attracted his attention. He kicked it to see what it was; and the name "Mike," in a sprawling hand, caught his eye.

His curiosity was aroused, and he picked up the paper, which proved to be a short communication. He glanced at the signature, and then at the note itself. It was directed to Stevens, and there could be no doubt it had been written by Big Head Mike, the chief of the Range Raiders.

Osgood eagerly devoured its contents, at the same time feeling that it was a sneaking thing to do.

He wondered how it came there. Doubtless it had been unintentionally dropped, and then carried by the wind into the grass.

The note contained a request that Stevens should meet Big Head Mike and his men at their rendezvous, the date for the meeting being given.

"Let's see; that was last night!" Osgood thought, making a mental calculation of the date. "And Stevens went to Broad Horn City last night. Did he go to Broad Horn, though?"

The words of the detective returned to him with new meaning, and as he thought over what Kansas Jim had said, he became convinced that the latter was informed of a great deal more than he had communicated.

He had not been able to determine, yet, whether Kansas Jim was a friend or foe. One thing, however, was plain: and that was, that, on the surface at least, the detective and the foreman appeared to hate each other very cordially.

He sat down on an upturned bucket, and again read the contents of the letter, endeavoring to come to a true understanding of what had lately occurred.

He was interrupted by a hoarse exclamation; and, turning, saw Luke Stevens rushing upon him.

The foreman had, a short time before, discovered that this tell-tale letter was missing, and instituted a search for it. While thus engaged, his eyes fell on Osgood. A fear that the latter had extracted the note from his pocket, and was then reading it, came upon him.

No one was within sight, and with cautious footsteps Stevens approached Osgood. He succeeded in getting near enough without drawing the young man's attention to tell that the letter was the very one for which he had been looking; and, as he became convinced of this, his rage leaped all bounds.

"You cowardly sneak!" he exclaimed, springing at Osgood and striking at him with a knife. "I'll kill you for that!"

There was no doubt in his mind that Osgood had really stolen the letter.

The young man let the paper fall to the ground, and turned at bay, lifting the bucket as a weapon of defense.

"I don't want to fight you," he declared, "and I won't, if you don't press me."

"You groveling puppy!" hissing the words with bitter emphasis. "You're always prying into my affairs and playing the low-lived sneak. I won't stand it any longer!"

His face was working with passion. "Stand back!" Win commanded, swinging the bucket threateningly. "You oughtn't to be so careless with your letters. I found that lying here in the grass."

"You lie, you villain; you stole it!" springing at him again.

Osgood parried the knife-thrust and brought

the bucket down on the foreman's head with a crash that staggered Stevens and reduced the bucket to its elemental fragments.

The foreman recovered quickly, however, and came at Win again with a vindictiveness greater than he had yet shown. The young man endeavored to retreat, warding off the blows as well as he could; but one of his feet caught in the grass and he stumbled to the ground, and the next instant the infuriated foreman was on him.

Osgood thoroughly realized his disadvantage and peril. He had no weapon but his hands, and Stevens was armed with a knife.

Osgood fought with the courage of despair, his energies being directed to grasping the knife-hand of his assailant and preventing the infliction of serious wounds. In this, he was only partially successful. He got hold of Stevens's right wrist and tenaciously clung to it; but the foreman, nevertheless, continued his savage thrusts, all the while endeavoring to wrest his hand away.

Osgood was fully Stevens's equal in strength, but the advantages were all on the side of the foreman. He had inflicted a half-dozen slight wounds; and then, tearing loose his hand, aimed a blow that, in his fierce rage, he meant to be fatal.

The young man's life would have been forfeited at that moment, had there not been a hand to interpose. Kitty Marshall appeared on the scene, and struck at the knife-arm, as the blow descended. The point of the knife was deviated from its aim, which was the heart of Win Osgood, but it struck the shoulder, and the keen blade ate its way deep into the flesh.

Luke Stevens, thinking he had given Osgood a fatal blow, and alarmed by the interference of the girl, sprung to his feet. As he did so, he turned on her a pair of eyes in which all the tortures of hell seemed to burn.

Kitty Marshall caught this look, but her mental distress was too great to enable her to interpret its meaning.

"Go!" she cried, and there was a sob in the word. "You have killed him! Go; and never let me see your face again!"

The foreman gave a cry of despair; and turning, fled swiftly from the scene.

Kitty Marshall bent over the prostrate form of Win Osgood, her hands clasped, and her eyes swimming in tears.

Then she called wildly and incoherently for help.

Her call was answered by her father and some of the cowboys.

Win had only fainted from exertion and loss of blood; and when the men arrived, he had recovered somewhat, and was trying to sit up.

"Give me that letter," he requested.

The letter had fallen to the earth, and was so folded that its contents were not observable. It was handed to him, and with his uninjured hand, he thrust it into a pocket.

He then suffered himself to be lifted and borne from the place.

Kitty Marshall would not permit him to be taken to the bunk-room, but made ready a bed in the ranch-house, and had him placed on it.

Luke Stevens, haunted by a vision of murder, had mounted a swift horse and was speeding from the scene of his crime.

Almost every cowboy possesses a rude knowledge of surgery, and no great time was spent in ascertaining the nature and extent of Osgood's injuries. Save the wound in the shoulder, none of the cuts were serious, though their profuse bleeding had greatly weakened him.

"I'll be all right in a day or two," he said, smiling cheerfully, as the cuts were sponged and bandaged. "I'm worth a dozen dead men yet."

There was one on the ranch who chided himself somewhat unnecessarily, and that was Philip Marshall. If he had hearkened to the petition of Kansas Jim that morning and placed Stevens under arrest, this thing would not have happened.

Kitty Marshall was assiduous in her attentions to the wounded man, and when she learned his hurts were only slight, she retired to her room and indulged in a good fit of crying.

She did not remain there long, however. When she saw that her father and the cowboys had retired from the house, she descended to the room in which Osgood lay, for the purpose of cheering him with kindly words and an offer of delicacies.

Osgood had been watching and hoping for her return, and his pale face lighted with a smile, as she came through the doorway.

"You are ever so much better!" she exclaimed, noting his improved appearance.

"I feel that I have very little excuse for lying here in bed at all," he declared. "I could go about, now, if it wasn't for this cut in my shoulder. I'm afraid that will keep me pretty close for a day or two."

Although she had sought to remove all traces of tears before coming into the room, he yet saw that she had been crying, and his heart gave a great throb, while a flush overspread his pallid features. She came up to the bed, and seated herself in a chair.

"Now, I am going to be your physician," and she shook a forefinger at him. "You're a good deal weaker than you think you are, and if you try to walk under a week, it will be in disobedience to my commands."

He looked at her earnestly, and his fingers touched hers, which were resting on the bed-covering.

"You'd tempt me to lie here forever," a wistful look in his eyes. "It almost makes me feel that I was fortunate in getting hurt."

There was a deep longing in his heart, and a striving for courage to speak the words that painted for utterance.

The flush had receded from his face, leaving it paler than before. For a moment the thought had come to him that perhaps this lovely daughter of his employer cared for him! But it fled, as he gave himself further thought. Her evident interest was only natural. She would have exhibited as much distress, probably, had any other one of the cowboys been thus hurt. And her tears—they were merely the result of over excitement and the consequent reaction. She did not love him;—she could not love him! It was all a vain, foolish dream!

An almost inaudible groan broke from his lips.

She arose to smooth his pillow that his head might rest easier.

"You are in pain!" she said. "Is there anything I can do? Perhaps I ought to call father, or some of the men."

"No!" he protested. "Do nothing of the kind. I am not suffering—that is, not to speak of! Sometimes my shoulder hurts a little. But it is nothing!"

She sat down again.

"I am so anxious to aid you, Win!"

She addressed him by his familiar first name, and he noticed that her voice trembled a little.

The hopeful, wistful feeling again dominated, and his great love struggled for utterance.

"You are so kind, Miss Marshall!" placing his shaking hand on hers. "I can never forget your kindness."

He struggled to a half-sitting posture and looked her in the eyes.

"You are so kind; and, forgive me for the words, I love you so—love you—love you!"

He was astonished at his own boldness. An hour before he could not have thus spoken, if his life had depended on it.

She buried her face in her hands, and as she did so, a great wave of regret swept over him.

"Forgive me!" he pleaded. "Forgive me; and I will go away from here to-morrow and never look on your face again. I am a fool! A silly fool! Say that you will not hold those thoughtless words against me!"

She looked up; and to his astonishment, he saw that her eyes were wet with fresh tears. Not only that! She was actually laughing at him.

"You do not think ill of me?" he panted.

"You silly boy!" and her face dimpled, radiantly. "I am not vexed at you; and if you go away to-morrow, you will go of your own accord. But, you haven't told me anything new!"

He stared, wondering what she meant.

"You haven't told me anything new! You have worn your heart on your sleeve for a long time, Win Osgood, and I've never been called blind!"

"You mean to say you are not angry with me?" almost springing up, forgetful of his hurts.

She again buried her face in her hands, and he fancied he heard a sob.

"Tell me," he urged. "Tell me! Can I hope you will ever care anything for me Miss Marshall?"

She did not answer in words; but when he again took her hand in his, he felt it tremble, and thus encouraged, he again told her of his great love for her.

"And you will some day be my wife?" he persisted.

"Perhaps!" smiling at him with wet eyes. "I shall make no promises, yet. You are a sick man, and on your good behavior. And, be-

sides, father is coming! Will you have the courage to tell him what you have told me?"

She ran hysterically from the room, leaving Win Osgood in a rapture of delight; and so absorbed was he by the new hope that thrilled him that he scarcely heard Marshall's questions concerning his condition.

He had learned that pretty Kitty Marshall really cared for him—loved him!—and he had no room for any other thought.

CHAPTER XIX.

CORRALED.

PHILIP MARSHALL had been conversing with the cowboys concerning the attack on Win Osgood. The foreman's crime was one not to be condoned. The cowboys were up in arms against him, and they had urged upon Marshall the advisability of his pursuit and capture.

Marshall had now come into the house to confer with Osgood, question him about the affair, and to report the opinion of the men.

"They say if it was just a fight and he struck you in self-defense, they wouldn't be willing to do anything; but they're of the opinion that he tried to kill you without giving you a fair show."

Win related the circumstances of the attack, and then produced the letter which had occasioned it.

"If you'll look at that, you'll understand the thing better," he said, as he handed the note to Marshall.

The ranchman was greatly affected as he read it. The note from Big Head Mike was convincing proof of the foreman's guilt.

"He must not get away!" the ranchman declared, rising. "The men are anxious to follow him, and they shall be given an opportunity. I will lead them myself."

This was an uncommon declaration from Marshall, for he was averse to the saddle, and had heretofore shrunk from the conflicts which the cowboys had had with the Raiders.

He passed from the room, and at once gave orders for the men to get themselves and their ponies in readiness. It was the general belief that Stevens would make direct for the railway, in an effort to get out of the country and avoid arrest.

Kitty was opposed to her father's engaging in the chase; but Marshall, when he had once made up his mind to do a thing, was not easily turned from his purpose.

While the horses were being saddled, and the arms prepared, he went up to Kansas Jim and laid a hand kindly on the detective's shoulder.

"I was wrong and you were right," he confessed. "Stevens has virtually acknowledged his guilt, if acknowledgment is needed, and you are still here, trusty and true. I hope you will forget what I said this morning. I want you to go with us, too, and shall be disappointed if you do not."

"Cunnel!" extending his hand, while his cross-eyes danced delightedly. "You said that time would tell which was true and which was false; and I told you that I believed the time was a-humpin' itself along lively. It's humped faster, though, than I 'lowed it would. The old chap with the scythe and hour-glass is a-gittin' more soople as he gits older. Goodness! Yes; he is so!"

Marshall gave the hand a warm grasp, and repeated the expressions of confidence.

Very few moments could be expended in talk, for the cowboys had nearly completed their hasty preparations, and Kansas Jim was being delayed, too, from getting his pony in readiness.

Marshall held a short interview with Osgood and Kitty; and then, at the head of his men, he rode from the ranch in the direction taken by the fleeing foreman.

Stevens had for some time been out of sight, and when a mile had been passed over, and they were far enough away to be beyond the beaten ground about the corrals, the best trailers were sent to the front, and the work of pursuit was begun in a systematic manner.

The trail of Stevens's horse was quickly picked up, and followed with great persistence and as rapidly as possible.

The common opinion that he would make direct for the railway was soon found to be erroneous. When out of sight of the ranch-house he had shifted his course and bore straight away for the foot-hills.

Kansas Jim smiled grimly when this discovery was made.

"I know'd it!" he muttered. "The pison

skunk as nat'rally belongs to Big-Head Mike as the river does to the sea."

Almost the entire afternoon was before them, and the trailers being experts, they crowded their ponies forward at a rattling pace. However, when the foot-hills were reached, they experienced the same difficulty which they had encountered in attempting to follow the Range Raiders. The ground was so hard and flinty that the trail was soon lost, and, though they searched diligently, they could not regain it. Near this point they had always been baffled.

"Pardners, if ye'll let me take a hand in the circus, I think I kin p'int ye in the right direction," Kansas Jim drawled. "Bayin' bloodhounds! Yes! I'm mostshore I kin. I've been into the home of these fellers, an' if our friend didn't make a blue streak fer that place, I'm missin' my guess."

Under Marshall's instructions, the detective was placed in advance, and he led them in the most direct route toward the home of the outlaws.

When they gained the high ridges surrounding the grove, they discerned a great commotion in the little valley; and, on looking through the gorges into the glades beyond, they saw that the stolen cattle and ponies were being hastily bunched.

Luke Stevens had arrived there nearly an hour before, and being confident that he would be pursued, and the Raiders routed or captured, he had advised a removal and abandonment of the place.

"Fleein' coyotes! They're a-gittin' ready to evacuate!" Kansas Jim spluttered. "We've arriy' jist in time."

A short council of war was held, and it was decided to attack the men in the valley, and pay no heed at present to those who were bunching the cattle.

The descent was made as quietly as possible, for they did not know just how strong was the force they were moving against. They succeeded in surprising the men in the grove, and with whoops and yells, charged them, driving them from the timber and toward the gorges.

Here, however, the outlaws made a stand, taking advantage of the rocks, and poured so hot a fire into the ranks of the cowboys that the latter were forced to beat a hasty retreat. One of them had been killed, several were more or less seriously wounded, and a number of the ponies had fallen. They found that the outlaws outnumbered them, and were armed with superior weapons.

Having turned the scale of battle, the Range Raiders crowded them closely, and as they were soon reinforced by those who were out with the cattle, they compelled the cowboys to take refuge in one of the buildings.

Here, they hemmed them in, and rained on the log cabin such a shower of balls that not a man dared show himself.

Night was near at hand, and just before the settling down of darkness, the Raiders made an attempt to take the cabin by storm. They were repulsed, however, with serious loss; and one of their number, having charged right up to the cabin door and been there wounded, was captured by the cowboys and dragged upon the inside of the building.

When they came to examine his wounds they found that he was mortally hurt and could live but a short time.

"Who is in command of those men out there?" Marshall questioned, bending over the rapidly failing outlaw.

"Big Head Mike," was the husky answer.

The dying outlaw remained silent for some time thereafter, his mind evidently on the great change that awaited him; then he looked toward Marshall and beckoned to him with his hand.

"I thought I ought to tell you," he whispered, speaking with much difficulty. "You are Mr. Marshall, ain't you?"

Marshall responded in the affirmative, wondering what communication the man had to make.

"Luke Stevens left hyer a little while ago, takin' a pardner with him, an' they're headed now, fer the Double-Bar. They're a-goin' after your daughter. Luke swore he was bound to be even with you, and that if he couldn't do anything else, he could capture the girl and break her heart, and that would be some satisfaction anyway."

The information startled every one who heard it. They could not doubt that Stevens was vindictively cruel; and, to such a man, the plan outlined would bring a fiendish sort of satisfaction.

Marshall questioned the outlaw further, but got only wandering and disjointed replies in return. He was rapidly failing, and a few minutes thereafter breathed his last.

"What shall be done?" was the query that went round the circle of anxious men.

Without, the shots of the outlaws were patterning against the heavy timbers, warning of the danger of attempting to leave the place; and besides, every pony of the cowboys had been slain.

"My God!" Marshall wailed, "can nothing be done to save my daughter?"

CHAPTER XX.

INTO THE ARMS OF HIS FOES.

"PARDNERS," and Kansas Jim stood forth in their midst, "if there's any man hyer what thinks he can wriggle through the ranks of them howlin' devils out there better'n I can, let him speak up, er ferever after hold his peace. I'm willin' to make a try of it, an' I think I can get through. I noticed where the rascals put their hosses, an' if I can capter one of 'em, I'll make a desp'rit try to git to the ranch ahead of Stevens."

All knew the venture would be a perilous one, requiring the most consummate tact and skill. The cowboys looked from Kansas Jim to Marshall; and a number of them stepped to the center of the room and indicated their willingness to take upon themselves the risk of breaking through the lines.

A look of gratitude came to the ranchman's face.

"Pardners," and Kansas Jim spoke again, "I can't say that it wouldn't be agreeable tohev lots of comp'ny. Crowdin' humans! No! I like comp'ny. But, on the present occasion, I don't think it's safe. It'll take a pesky lot o' squirmin' an' crawlin' to git out o' hyer 'thout bein' seen. Besides, if too many should leave hyer, them that's left couldn't hold out ag'in' the screechin' varmints out there."

Marshall and the cowboys recognized the wisdom of this; and, after a short consultation, in which opinions were freely expressed, it was agreed that Kansas Jim should make the attempt alone.

The Raiders had lost none of their vigilance; though, having been taught a lesson by the last assault, they discreetly kept at a distance, and contented themselves with a scattering fusilade.

The detective's preparations were of the simplest. He took with him nothing but a revolver and a knife; and the door having been slightly opened, he dropped out on his hands and knees, and crouched close to the earth to avoid the bullets.

The cowboys held their fire, fearful lest the flashes of their weapons should reveal him to their foes.

Owing to the darkness, the opening and closing of the door was not observed by the Raiders, and by keeping close to the earth, the risk from the bullets was reduced to a minimum.

The detective made but slow progress at first, for he had determined there should be no miscarriage of the plan through any carelessness of his. The shots from the Raiders' rifles told him where they were located, and enabled him to direct his course.

The greatest danger came when he drew near to this encircling line. But the very firing of the enemies aided him, for the report of the guns served to drown the slight noise he was making.

He had resolved that, if discovered, he would rise to his feet and make a bold dash, regardless of the peril, for the risk of death from bullets seemed no greater than the danger of capture.

He succeeded, however, in making his way through the cordon, and when he had crawled for a considerable distance beyond the circle of outlaws, he quietly rose and hastened toward the point where he had last seen the ponies.

He found them there, some lying down and others peacefully grazing, and to his great joy, too, he ascertained that they were not guarded. He could find neither saddles nor bridles, but some of them had on halters with the ropes tied about their necks.

Selecting one of these, he cautiously mounted it, and guiding it by means of the halter rope and the pressure of his knees, he turned it in the direction of the plains.

As he had now been over the route several times, the course was familiar to him, and he was not long in finding the gorge that led from the foot-hills. Until this was reached, he let the animal pick its way slowly; but he now urged it into a quick gallop.

To his delight he found that the broncho was a speedy one, fresh and in good condition.

When the plains country was gained he urged it to a still faster pace, heading directly for the Double-Bar Ranch.

It was a long ride; and, without a sahne, a most wearisome and exhausting one; but he

kept the pony to the work until the ranch buildings loomed dimly through the darkness.

He came to a halt to more fully consider the situation. He felt sure he had not passed Stevens and his associate, and wondered if they had had time to reach the ranch and bear the girl away. Had he arrived too late?"

The query was answered by a revolver-shot, followed quickly by others. The firing was at the ranch-house!

With a muttered imprecation, Kansas Jim dug his heels into the pony's flanks and rode briskly toward the scene of trouble.

Stevens and his companion had reached the place more than a half-hour before, but the stealthiness with which they went about their work had delayed them. They had succeeded in surprising the girl, and wrapping her in a blanket, and smothering her in the same, had essayed to bear her from the house.

They had been discovered by Win Osgood, whose painful wounds and generally feverish condition had kept him awake; and Osgood had sprung from his bed, regardless of his injuries, and attempted to stop them. They fired at him as they ran for their horses, and the sounds of these shots were what Kansas Jim heard.

"I'm a comin', pardner!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Whoopie! Yes! Hold the fort!"

The scoundrels who were carrying away the girl heard the shouts, also, and not knowing how many were coming to Osgood's aid, they tumbled on their horses in hot haste and made for the open prairie, Stevens bearing the girl in front of him.

Osgood's strength was not equal to his desires, and he fell near the house, in an almost fainting condition.

"I'll git'er, pardner! Don't you never worrit!" Kansas Jim called, for the other's encouragement, as he shot by.

The detective's horse was already well blown, while those of Luke Stevens and his brother Raider had been refreshed by their rest. Nevertheless, Kansas Jim crowded them hard. This would have been a perilous thing to do, probably, if they had known there was but one man following them, but they were too frightened to stop and ascertain the truth.

Kansas Jim was anxious they should not learn this, and yelled in every variety of high key and low, firing his revolver repeatedly to assist in the deception.

He had reason for this, and this was a hope to call friends to his aid. That these friends could not be far away, he had every reason to believe. He had thought of their aid, and spoken of it, in his consultation with Marshall and the cowboys.

As he continued to shout and fire his revolver, a thrilling cheer came in answer, accompanied by the thunder of horses' feet.

Ebenezer Hall had gone straight to Broad Horn City, on separating from the detective in the edge of the foot-hills. His object was to there gather a force of men, and these men, he had assured Kansas Jim, he would have with him at the Double-Bar Ranch by the hour of twelve on this night.

It was near that time, now, and it was the cheering of Hall's men, and the trampling of their horses, which now came on the breeze.

They had been advancing quietly, until the calls of the detective and the sounds of his revolver had reached them. They had come forward then at an increased pace, but had not begun cheering until they caught sight of the Raiders whom the detective was pursuing.

Luke Stevens, while congratulating himself on his success, had really ridden into the arms of his foes!

Hall's men spread out in an inclosing semi-circle, and bore down on the fleeing Raiders with the impetuosity of a whirlwind. Seeing these men in front, and not knowing how many there were in the rear, Luke Stevens and his comrade turned aside and strove to pass the advancing line. This they could not accomplish; and after a brisk race of less than ten minutes, they were overtaken and captured; and the sorely frightened girl set at liberty.

She was very nervous and much agitated, but recovered somewhat when they returned her to the ranch-house. Win Osgood was found resting quietly near where he had fallen, and was tenderly borne back to bed. His exertions and the excitement had superinduced a high fever.

CHAPTER XXI.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

SEVERAL of the men were left to guard the ranch-building, while the remainder of the force, reorganized and under the leadership of Kansas Jim, and mounted on fresh horses, set out im-

mediately for the home of the outlaws, where Marshall and his men were so closely besieged.

It required almost the entire remnant of the night to gain the foot-hills, and when they came to the grove, day was dawning.

The Range Raiders still maintained their position, though little firing was now going on, probably because they had discovered that they were only wasting their ammunition.

They had no knowledge of the approach of this new force, and the quiet that had for the last few hours rested on the grove had caused them to relax their watchfulness. Such attention as they were giving, too, was bestowed entirely on the cabin. Hence, it was not a difficult thing for the men under Kansas Jim to enter the grove and completely surround them, in the gray of the early morning.

The first intimation of danger which they had, was when the detective called out for them to surrender. His men at the same time showed themselves in the underbrush, having been instructed so to do.

The watchers within the cabin caught the stern words of the detective and saw the girding line of the new force, and their cheers rose loudly.

The Range Raiders were almost panic-stricken at this turn of events. Nevertheless, Big Head Mike was not a man to tamely surrender, even though the chances were so desperately against him.

His loud commands rung out, calling his men to mass and charge on this new foe.

They tried to obey the order, grouping themselves about their chief. But Marshall's men poured from the cabin, at the same instant, and being joined by the men from Broad Horn who had ranged themselves on that side, they advanced on the outlaws.

Big Head Mike and his men were thus literally placed between two fires. They made a short, sharp resistance; then realizing that it was useless to contend against so superior a force, they made a wild break for liberty.

A few of them were slain, as they thus attempted to flee, and among them was Big Head Mike, the Raider Chief. The others threw down their arms and surrendered unconditionally.

The dead were buried where they had fallen; and, when the stolen cattle and horses were collected, the prisoners were placed under a strong guard, and all moved in the direction of the Double-Bar.

Men and animals were alike worn out when the ranch was reached, which was not until late evening.

Win Osgood was found much improved, and apparently on the high road to complete recovery. Pretty Kitty Marshall, somewhat paler than usual, met her father at the door with a welcoming kiss, and joy once more reigned in this prairie home.

There is but little more to tell:

Luke Stevens and the Raiders who had been captured were duly tried for their high crimes, and received long terms of imprisonment as their just punishment. They had sown the wind and they reaped the whirlwind, as they so richly deserved.

There was a wedding at the ranch-house of the Double-Bar a month later.

The reader scarcely need be told that the high contracting parties were honest Win Osgood and sweet Kitty Marshall, the ranchman's daughter.

Kansas Jim, the Cross-cut Detective, was present, and with the possible exception of the bridegroom, was the happiest man there.

"Pardners," he said, when the ceremony had ended and congratulations were in order, "I feels better an' bigger over this hyer than I ever did when I was a-ridin' of the sacred ox! Flyin' Cupids! Yes! I reely do!"

THE END.

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